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ROBIN.

BY

MRS. PARR,

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'DOROTHY FOX,' 'ADAM AND EVE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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ROBIN.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN, on that late October afternoon, after driving back from the station, Christopher reached home, he felt as if he had never before thoroughly appreciated the comforts by which he was surrounded. The house was so warm, the fires looked so cheerful, the rooms so well furnished, that a feeling of satisfaction stole over him—a feeling which involuntarily gave birth to the thought that

perhaps the possession of all this might have some weight with Robin.

Thus far his father and he had spoken but little of her. Mr. Blunt, amazed at the improvement in his son's condition, at first could do nothing but comment on it.

'Why, I do believe that that's the place to make a man of you, Chris,' he exclaimed, his face beaming with satisfaction. 'You look pounds to the good from what you did when you went away. You must be weighed to-morrow; you've gained flesh, that's certain: managed to put something more than skin on your bones this time, anyway.'

'They told me I was looking ever so much better than when I came,' Christopher replied.

'Better! You're not the same. I say, young chap, I tell you what it is: the next time there's any need of a doctor, instead

of calling one in I shall start you off to this Venice again.'

'Oh, I don't know that all the credit's due to Venice. There's something in the care they've taken of me there.'

'They were glad to see you, then?'

'Very glad. Mr. Veriker was never tired of saying how good it was of you to send me to him.'

Mr. Blunt puffed himself out like a pigeon. 'I was glad to see,' he said, 'by the letters you wrote me, that my gentleman's come to his senses again. Poverty's taught him which side his bread's buttered on, and he's learnt the lesson, upstart that he used to be!'

'You'd find him greatly changed now,' said Christopher, eager to divert the conversation.

'Ah, ah! I've no doubt I should,' and

Mr. Blunt accompanied his laugh by a wink of the eye. 'Nothing alters people more than having to come down on their marrow-bones.'

'I feel certain he won't last long,' said Christopher gravely. 'It seemed to me as if I saw death written on his face when I said "Good-bye" to him.'

Mr. Blunt might have said that he was not sorry to hear it, but a superstitious dread of what must some day overtake himself made him answer:

'Ah, well; he won't leave many behind to be sorry for him.'

'There's his daughter.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

Mr. Blunt felt that decency would oblige the daughter to assume some show of sorrow, although it was not incumbent on him to credit her with feeling it.

'What's she like to look at, eh? You had her photo taken, I hope.'

Christopher winced. It pained him to have to describe Robin.

'Yes; but I won't tell you about her until you have seen it, then you can give me your opinion.'

'All right, you shall have it. I used to be thought a fairish judge of a good-looking woman.'

'Then after dinner I'll fetch it down. We shall be by ourselves then, and I can tell you all about them. It's no use beginning now and having to leave off again.'

This arrangement meeting with Mr. Blunt's approval, the conversation during dinner, while the servants were present, was confined to descriptions of the places which Christopher had seen, more especially of Venice and its wonderful buildings, in the

accounts of which Mr. Blunt was much interested. He, in his turn, related all the home news, more especially that which, while waiting at the station, Miss Georgy Temple had put him in possession of.

Miss Temple was the eldest unmarried daughter of the rector of Wadpole—a cousin of Mr. Chandos, the Squire, who was lying ill. Wadpole was a poor living, but Mr. Temple—in early days a gay collegian—had little else left now but its income to live on. Both he and his wife belonged to good old families, and in spite of the very droll *ménage* they kept, they mixed with, and were welcome guests at, the best houses in the county. Every one said that Nature had intended Georgy Temple—a fair young Amazon of twenty-two—for a man, and she, sighing over the mistake, did her best to rectify it. She rode and drove more fear-

lessly than any woman for thirty miles round, and if these accomplishments were not maintained with all the grace desired, she excused it under the plea that she always meant business when she went out.

'I hate them to feel obliged to remember that I am a woman,' she would say; and she used to tell with triumph of a certain fox-loving squire who, on a day when she had come to grief, and lay doubled up studying the sky on the flat of her back, constrained, by the sight of a habit, to jump off his horse and offer help, exclaimed, 'Oh, it's you, is it!' and was on and away before she could reply, saving the others from a like delay by shouting back, 'Come on, it's only Georgy Temple.'

Miss Temple had a certain familiarity with sport of all kinds. She would go out with a rod when there was nothing better

to do, and shoulder a gun if her father needed a companion. In a fit of generosity the Squire had given her a horse, and there was the family pony to which was attached the cart in which she had driven to the station.

'Miss Temple, by what she was saying, seemed to fancy the rector thought very seriously of what's the matter with the Squire,' said Mr. Blunt, continuing to retail scraps of the conversation. 'He's not so young as he used to be,' he added; 'and at that time of life anything sudden is likely to go hard, I should say.'

'Let me see,' said Christopher, trying to recall what he had heard about him, for since they had come the Squire had been but little seen in Wadpole; 'he hasn't any children, has he?'

'No, never has married; always was

going to be, but somehow it never came off. He's got a nephew he brought up, but he quarrelled with him. Terrible thing for a man to be on his death-bed and nobody he can call his own to leave his money to,' and Mr. Blunt sighed lugubriously. He sympathised acutely with such a situation.

'There are the Temples,' said Christopher. 'I'm sure they want it badly, and they are his cousins, aren't they?'

'Cousins!' repeated Mr. Blunt contemptuously. 'What if they are? I've got cousins, haven't I?' and turning his head to see that the servants had not reappeared, he added: 'but to think that the Tappses or the Perkinses would be the better for all I cut up for, would that be any satisfaction to me, I should like to know? Not a bit of it. It must be somebody who's bone of your bone, and flesh of your flesh, and bears

your name, so that if you ain't in it, you ain't, as in the other way, gone altogether—straight wiped out o' the whole concern;' and for a few moments Mr. Blunt remained silent, as if appalled by the consideration of such a disaster. 'And it's something of that sort that makes me set on your marrying,' he began, feeling that this was a fitting moment to speak seriously to Christopher. 'Here you are up six-and-twenty years old, and with not so much as your eye fixed on anybody yet. Well, that mustn't go on.'

'Why? You did not marry until you were past my age,' said Christopher.

'And for good reason too. I'd got to work to maintain my wife. I hadn't the luck o' some people to have a father born before me to make a fortune that I was only asked to spend, or, if so, I'd have done all you've got to do; I'd have taken my pick

and held up my finger. There'd have been plenty to follow it then as now.'

'In my case I don't know where the "plenty" would be,' and Christopher spoke despondingly. 'I've never seen any girl anxious to marry me yet.'

'Why, bless my soul, you don't expect 'em to be jumping down your throat before you've opened your mouth, do you? Anybody, to listen to you, 'ud think I'd got to deal with a born fool. Here, where's this likeness I'm to see? If I'm to look at it to-night you'd better go and fetch it.' Mr. Blunt felt his temper rising, and the only way of restraining it was to change the topic. 'And what is it you have to tell me about Veriker? Nothing very agreeable, I dare say.'

Christopher thought it wiser to go for the photograph without more delay. He had a

thought that the sight of Robin's face might restore his father's good-humour.

'It's no use,' he said, taking it out of the box where it lay, and pressing it close to him. 'It would be hoping against hope. She couldn't endure it. It would kill her to listen to the things he would be certain to say of her father.'

Meantime, Mr. Blunt, left to himself, seized the opportunity of mentally protesting against the conduct of his son. 'If I could only make him out,' he said, 'what he wants: what he's after,' and he rubbed away at his bald pate as if fairly beaten by a mystery to which he could find no solution. Christopher's footsteps made him alter his position.

'There she is,' he said, laying the portrait before his father. 'Look,' and he pointed his finger to the name—'"Robin Veriker,"

do you see she has written it underneath for you?'

'H'm! Is it like?'

'Exactly like—only not half so pretty.'

Christopher was looking over the old man's shoulder; he could not see the expression of his face.

'She's good-looking then?' he asked craftily.

'Good-looking!' Christopher repeated with a tender rippling of the words. 'What do you think? I expected to hear you call the face lovely, beautiful.'

'Here, I say!' Mr. Blunt, looking up, turned suddenly round, but not before Christopher had time to draw back into his shell. 'There's nothing up between you two I hope, is there?'

'Up—between us two!' Christopher had gone round to the other side of the table.

'I don't know what you mean,' he added.

'Why, that—that vagabond hasn't been baiting a trap with this good-looking daughter of his, and you've been caught in it, eh? Come, I've got a pretty sharp nose for a scent of that kind.'

'So you may have, but in this case it has led you rather astray, I fancy.' And the tone of his voice—a tone which he seldom used, but which his father perfectly knew—betrayed that the vexation he felt was greater than he desired to show. When this mood was on him, Mr. Blunt had a suspicion that he was no match for his son, so in a somewhat apologetic manner he said:

'Well, after all, I don't know that it would have been anything to wonder at if they had tried it on. Veriker might have thought I'd only myself to blame for letting

you go; it isn't every father, I can tell you, would have trusted his son there.'

'You knew your son was to be trusted,' Christopher spoke coldly.

'Well, yes, wherever there's a girl in the question I believe he is,' and he laughed discontentedly; and then he took up Robin's likeness and fell to examining it again. 'She's a uncommon good-looking girl,' he said after a time; 'more of the father, though, than the mother in her; doesn't take after her aunt at all that I can see.'

This last sentence, put as an interrogative, Christopher felt bound to answer.

'No,' he said; 'in appearance she does not remind me in the smallest degree, but in disposition I think there is a great similarity—her ways are something the same, and the manner she has of attending on her father. I was often put in mind of the days

when anything ailed either of us, how the one after whom she's named would wait on us.'

'Ah!' and Mr. Blunt gave vent to a prolonged sigh, 'the one she's named after was one in a hundred—a hundred! a thousand I might better say. Never fear, Christopher, you and I ain't likely ever to see two Robina Blunts in our day.'

'No, indeed,' and Christopher echoed the sigh from the very bottom of his heart; 'I fear we never shall.'

'She was such a sensible woman, clear-sighted and clever! Bless me, I never wanted to seek any other companion while she was in the way. I used to talk to her by the hour together, and there she'd sit and listen, delighted with all I'd got to say.'

Sad martyrdom! Was she, who bore it, now reaping the fruit of all the sacrifices to duty she had made below?

'Robin is very like her in that respect, I should fancy.'

Oh, Christopher, how wily love is teaching you to be!

'H'm! that's how a woman should be, not wanting to hear her own tongue running all day long.'

'Yes; but that's too much the way with most of them.'

'You're pretty right there, and the higher you go the more sound you get.'

Mr. Blunt remained silent awhile—reviewing in thought the different girls he knew.

'I should fancy our neighbour here, Miss Georgy Temple, was a pretty good hand at letting her clapper run.'

He had come from the station impressed with the idea that he should like Miss Georgy for a daughter-in-law.

Christopher smiled.

'I expect they'll be looking rather high for her now, if by chance the Squire should leave them anything. She was his favourite, I know.'

Ah, Mr. Blunt hadn't thought of that. There'd be one, if not the best, knocked off his list. There were some Miss Pakingtons, a Miss Twysden, and two or three more. Paupers! who looked down their noses when they met him. He dared say they'd be glad enough to marry his son if they thought they'd the chance, but whoever married Christopher would have to saddle horses with him. He was master of his own house, and intended to remain so; and drawing himself together as if to assert his position, his eyes fell again on the photograph.

'What does the father expect me to do

for her?' he asked, indicating by his finger to whom he was referring.

'He doesn't expect anything from you while he lives—at least he has never said so.'

'Does he think himself that he's dying?'

'He seems to feel certain that he shan't live long. When I spoke two or three times of his coming to England, he always shook his head and said he should never see England again, and that's what makes him so anxious about Robin. He might drop down in the street—a fit of excitement would kill him any day—and then she'd be left absolutely destitute, with not a penny to call her own, and, except us, not a creature to turn to.'

'Ah, yes, that's the way with all these high and mighty gentry. You ain't thought fit to put your legs under the same table with 'em while they're alive, but you're

good enough to look after their children when they're dead and have spent every blessed sixpence that ought to go for the keeping 'em.'

'Well, but the children can't help that. It's not their fault. I'm sure, in Robin Veriker's case, she looks at every penny before she spends it. She always would ask if I could afford any little trifle I wanted to buy her, and at first I had quite a tussle to make her accept anything.'

'Well, I don't think any the worse of her for that. It shows she isn't one of the sponging order, and has a proper independent spirit.'

'She has plenty of that, I can tell you. Nothing would please her better than to earn her own living. She was always asking, if they came to England, what she could find to do.'

'Has he had her taught anything, then?'

'Oh, she sings beautifully!'—Christopher was growing enthusiastic—'and she chatters away in French and Italian like a native. I didn't ask her if she could paint, but I dare say she can. She seemed to me to be able to do everything.'

Mr. Blunt gave a pleased chuckle.

'I say,' he said, 'she'd rather take the shine out of a few about here, I fancy.'

'I should say she would!' said Christopher.

'And yet she don't seem to have struck it off with you. You don't seem to have been much taken with her? Why, bless me, at your age, if I'd been thrown much with a girl who'd got a face like that,' and he held up the photograph admiringly, 'I don't know what might have happened to me.'

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'It's well for you, then, that I'm not so

inflammable,' and Christopher laughed a little confusedly.

'How well for me?' exclaimed his father.

'Why, I can hardly suppose you want me to have anything to do with Mr. Veriker's daughter.'

'I'm not quite sure of that, since I've heard what you've told me. According to your account, it seems pretty certain that he's got one leg in the grave already. Well, when the other gets there, we shan't have him to trouble us.'

'Oh, time enough to think of that,' said Christopher hurriedly, 'when he's gone and she is here.'

'Oh yes; dilly-dally, and let some one else step in before you. That's your way. That's you all over. A girl situated like her can't afford to pick and choose like you

can. The first man that offers she must say "yes" to.'

A terrible dread seized on Christopher that such might be the case. How he wished he had opened his heart to Mr. Veriker.

'I don't know about dilly-dallying,' he began slowly; 'but before one thinks of marrying a person, you begin to wonder if——' and here he stopped.

'Well,' said his father impatiently, 'you begin to wonder if—what? Whether you care enough for them, I s'pose. That's just the question I want to know. How do you feel about this girl? D'ye like her? D'ye think you ever could like her?—Come, now's the time: let's have your answer, and then I shall know how to act and what to expect.'

'As for liking her, it's not a question of

that with me.' He had taken up the poker, and seemed to find his speech assisted by making savage thrusts with it between the bars. 'No man could be with her without liking her.'

'Oh, oh! that's the upshot of it all, is it? The cat seems out of the bag at last. Well,' and his eyes twinkled with pleasure, 'I'll do the thing handsome by her: I'll write to her father.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort!' exclaimed Christopher.

Mr. Blunt turned a look of blank astonishment on him.

'No; most certainly not,' he added decisively. 'It's one thing,' he went on hurriedly, 'for me to care for her; it's another that I should suppose she cares for me.'

A burst of imprecations deafened Chris-

topher. *His son!* not cared for by that scoundrel's, that swindler's, that pauper's daughter! Oh, he must try and calm himself, or he should be carried off by a fit of apoplexy. In a moment Christopher saw he had been led into making a false movement. How should he rectify it?

'You seem to forget,' he said, 'all you said to me before I started. The very first evening I got there, bearing it in mind, I said we would consider each other as brother and sister.'

'And if you did, what's that got to do with it?'

'Everything. Knowing your prejudice against them, it never entered my head to think you would sanction anything more, and certainly because you seem to have changed your opinions, I don't choose to be flung at the head of the girl, and accepted

for the reason that I am the first person who has asked her to marry him.'

There was some truth in this argument, and Mr. Blunt began to be mollified.

'Oh, well,' he said, 'if that's all—that you haven't played the spoony enough with her—I've got no more to say. You can do that in writing, though, can't you?'

'No, I can't,' said Christopher shortly.

'The devil's in it; you don't want to go there again, do you? Oh, well, if so, I shan't stop you. You may go to blazes, I was going to say, only that you seem to have hit on old Harry's daughter without it taking you quite so far away.'

CHAPTER II.

THIS subject of marriage between Christopher and Robin, once mooted, began to take a wonderful hold of Mr. Blunt's fancy; the more he reflected on it the better the idea pleased him. Such an arrangement would rid him of that father-in-law whom he had always pictured as prying into his affairs; there would be no need of settlements; the bride could be easily taught her place, and he be spared the necessity of having to keep up company manners before her.

His anxiety now was to bring matters to

a close; a dread seized him lest Robin should be snapped up, and he did nothing but urge the necessity of action upon Christopher.

'Why don't you pack up and start off at once? I should,' he would say.

'But I am only just back,' with assumed reluctance Christopher would reply; and for a moment Mr. Blunt had to swallow down his impatience, to return to the attack with:

'Well then, write a letter to the girl, and let her have a hint of what you mean to do.'

'Oh no—things of that sort can't be written about; besides, until I get there, I don't quite know. I should like to see her again before I make up my mind what I mean to say.'

'Tch! make up your mind! While

you're about that, some Mossoo will step in —that'll be the end of it, I can see.'

'And why not?—all the better if she cares for him more than for me.'

'What the devil does it matter who *she* cares for?' roared the old man; 'the question is, do you care for her? if so, have her; if you don't, leave her.'

But to the choice of this alternative, Mr. Blunt could get no reply; and prompted by his own desires, and the assurance he gave himself that, should Christopher alter his mind, he could make it up to Robin in some way—unknown to his son, he wrote to Mr. Veriker, desiring that he would not give his countenance to any suitor who might come in their way, as he believed that his son Christopher had taken a sort of fancy to Robin, and though—as no doubt Mr. Veriker would feel—it wasn't exactly the

kind of choice he cared to see, rather than put an obstacle in the way of his son's happiness, he had given his consent, and that before long Christopher would probably pay them another visit, and, as he supposed, say what he had to say.

This was the gist of the letter, mixed up with much vulgar condescension, patronage, and pity that read so like scorn, that Mr. Veriker was made furious by it, the effect rendered worse, because he had no one to confide it to. If he showed to Robin what the old ruffian said, she would starve rather than be beholden to him for bread; if he wrote and told Christopher, he was perhaps destroying the only friend she had left. Mr. Blunt had bade him take no notice of the letter. Mr. Veriker felt that silence was the wisest, but at the same time the hardest course to pursue.

Brooding on the indignity offered him—for Mr. Blunt had been mindful to take out in condescension the long score he had against his ancient enemy—all the old bitterness was stirred up afresh, and the calmness and quiet of mind which was his only chance of life destroyed by the ferment set up within him. Dead! a thousand times rather would he see Robin dead than leave her to the scant mercy of that old monster! and—finding some pretext to send her out, in order that he might be alone—he would pace the room to and fro, seeking for a way to revenge himself without letting the blow aimed be dealt through Christopher. Robin, returning, would find him worn out—the fiery spirit had consumed the strength of the failing body—and hardly able to speak or move, during the rest of the day he would lie silent, following her

about with wistful eyes that pierced her through with sorrow. And then the agony of those evenings, when in the dark, because he had a disposition to sleep, Robin sat—his hands clasped in hers—the victim of a hundred vague alarms : he wasn't breathing ! and she was all but choked by the tumult of her heart, forced into making some slight noise that by rousing him would still this wild terror, or a ray of light across his face would show all its haggard lines and make them strike her afresh ; the deep-set eyes, the temples sunken in each side, the hollow cheeks, the drawn, set mouth.

'Papa !' the word seemed wrung from out her lips.

'What is it ? Yes, my dear.'

'Nothing ; I thought—I heard you speak —to—me.' All Robin's breath had died

away, she had no power to say more; and her father sinking back into a drowsy state, the conflict with her fears began, and had to be gone through as before.

Christopher no longer with them—without a friend near to whom she could go for counsel or advice—what should she do? That her father was ill, very ill, she felt sure—twice lately he had had slight returns of that terrible pain. Once while Robin was out, the people from below had come up to find him faint; they had been attracted by the noise of something falling on the floor. Surely he ought to have a doctor! But the bare mention of calling one in made him angry with her.

'Never wait again,' she said to the man who kept the house; 'the next time he is ill send off at once for any doctor near;

when he is fetched to him he cannot say no.'

And therefore it was that some days later, the landlord, Giacomuzzi—who, with an Italian's dread of death, longed to get them out of his house—at the first symptom of alarm rushed off for his family physician, who happened to live close at hand.

Chance directed that the old man called in had had a wider experience than many of his fellows, and when he was there, Mr. Veriker had not the strength nor the energy to protest against his presence; he answered his questions, accepted his prescription, and made a sign that Robin should pay him his fee, and send him away.

'He has some distress of mind, something that is agitating him just now—is it not so?' asked the doctor, closing the door behind Robin that her father might not hear.

'No,' she said; 'nothing that I know of.'

'But yes; there is something that I see. Try and discover what, and remove it, if you can. It is his only chance of life, that of being quiet and not agitated in any way.'

'Wait,' she said; 'come downstairs—I want to speak to you,' and together they went into the tiny bureau below; and some minutes later, the doctor having gone, Robin came out to go upstairs again.

Madame Giacomuzzi, who had a soft heart embedded in that mountain of flesh which constituted her body, took her hand and squeezed it sympathetically. 'Poor child! poor child!' she murmured, and Robin thanked her with a smile. The woman was crying; her dark eyes were humid and wet: but Robin's were hot and

dry; she could find no tears to ease her sorrow.

The next day a letter from Christopher arrived. Mr. Veriker, recovered from his attack, which had been but a slight one, read it and laid it on one side, expecting that Robin would question him about it, but to his astonishment she seemed to take no notice.

'Don't you want to hear what he says, Bobby?' he asked, with a faint attempt at his old humour.

'When you want to tell me, I do,' and she came over and knelt down by his side. 'I want to hear all your secrets, papa.'

'My secrets, child?'

'Yes; all those that trouble you—you have some that give you trouble, haven't you? Haven't you had some worry lately, within the last ten days—something you

have kept to yourself and haven't told me ?' She was speaking very fast; her face had grown flushed and earnest; she had thrown her arms across her father's neck, and was resting her chin on his breast. 'Papa, don't do this; speak out to me.' Involuntarily she closed her eyes for a moment; her nostrils were dilated, her hands tightened, until the nails seemed plunged into the palms. 'The doctor has told me all,' she said, 'so there is nothing I cannot bear to hear from you;' and relaxing from the strain she had put upon herself, she let her head slide down, and there it lay, nestled and half hidden in her father's silky beard.

Had either of them—he, in his all but fifty years; she in her seventeen short summers—ever sent up a cry so earnest as that which now implored that they might

go together. What mattered death if neither were left behind to sorrow? Parting was death.

'O child!'

'O father!'

And there they lay, clasped close together, until the best part of an hour had passed; and then, little by little, Mr. Veriker began to ease the weight of his distress by telling part of its cause to his daughter. He spoke at first in short broken sentences, ejaculations—if he could but see her settled, provided for—that ascertained, and he should be happy—nay, he believed he should be well—for it was only when he could not rid himself of anxiety that he felt ill.

'See how well I was,' he said, 'when Christopher was with us.'

Robin sighed.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, 'how I wish he

would come again!' and immediately her thoughts grew busy as to what inducement she could hold out to bring Christopher back to them, so that she was not struck by the long pause before her father's next sentence came.

'That letter,' he said with an effort, 'is to tell me he is coming.'

'Coming! What, coming here—soon—now at once, papa?'

Her nerveless limbs seemed to have regained their strength. She was still kneeling by his side, but by this time with her face aglow, her head erect.

O Youth, how strong hope dwells in you! In that moment Robin saw her father raised up, made well and strong, and—all by Christopher's return.

'Did you ask him to come?'

'No, my dear.'

Something in the tone struck her.

'Did his father tell you in that letter you had from him?'

Mr. Veriker's look made assent.

'And you did not tell me, papa. Why did you not tell me?'

'Oh, I was afraid that perhaps you might think it too great a sacrifice.'

'What a sacrifice?' and she fixed her eyes on her father inquiringly.

'Well, he—indeed, both of them—they want you to marry Christopher.'

'Marry Christopher?' the words dropped down on Robin's heart like lead. 'Yes; and if I did?'

'Oh, my dear, if you did, there would be an end to all my anxiety. With somebody to look after you, and plenty of money for you to spend, I should have nothing more to worry over.'

'And is it this, then, that has been worrying you?' she asked earnestly.

'How could it be otherwise, seeing how friendless I leave you?'

'Hush! don't talk of leaving me. If I married Christopher, and you had everything you wanted, you would get well, wouldn't you?'

He shook his head.

'I don't know,' he said doubtfully. 'At times I think I might. I'm not quite tired of life yet, somehow.'

'And when we could go where we pleased and have whatever was good for you without any care of money, why, you would soon be all right. The doctor told me so.'

'Did he?' he said hopefully. 'The remedy does not sound half bad; it strikes me as rather jolly,' and the old smile lit up his wan face again. 'And you, Bobby, you

are not tired of your old father yet, eh, are you?'

'Tired!' she said, and as the dread of losing him swept over her, she flung herself down, buried her head, and wept passionately.

'Child! don't, don't!' he murmured, and the sound of his voice roused Robin to control herself.

'I don't know why I am crying,' she sobbed. 'I—am—sure there is nothing to cry for. I am very glad to marry Christopher—very glad—indeed—that he has asked me.'

CHAPTER III.

CHRISTOPHER at this time was already half-way on his journey back to Venice, his starting speeded by a conversation in which Mr. Blunt betrayed that he had taken upon himself to write to Mr. Veriker.

Poor fellow! his task was by no means a pleasant one, for with his eyes refusing to remain blind to his ostentation and vulgarities, Mr. Blunt was his father, and Christopher held it a sacred duty to screen from others failings which made much in his own life bitter.

Absence, without in any way diminishing his love, had tempered the heat of its fire, and with a full sense of the happiness he was giving up, he felt secure in his own strength to study only what should be best for Robin's future welfare.

Before leaving home he had written a letter registering a promise not only to watch over Robin, but by an income which she should believe she derived from her father, to provide her with means of support. More fluent as a writer than as a speaker, he had very touchingly alluded to his love, its hopelessness, and the pain he knew he must suffer. Yet he was willing to give up Robin without even asking her, because circumstances might induce her to make a choice which her later judgment might repent.

With this letter ready to give to Mr.

Veriker, Christopher arrived in Venice, and was—unexpected by them—ushered into the presence of the father and daughter. Robin was ready to go out. Mr. Veriker had but just come down. Both were effusively warm in their welcome of him. Only a few weeks had elapsed since they had parted, yet what a change he saw in both! The first look at Mr. Veriker came on him as a shock; Robin's pale cheeks and tired eyes struck him with dismay. The very weather, too, seemed in harmony. It was cold and wet; fogs hung low over the canals; the sky was no longer sunny.

'I wish I had you both in England,' he could not help saying, contrasting the cheerless room with the comforts he had left behind him; 'the houses there are so warm and cosy.'

Mr. Veriker looked round him, and gave a little shiver.

'What do you say,' he said to Robin; 'shall we go back with Christopher?'

She tried to smile assent. What was this that had come over her? Only that morning she had awakened full of desire that Christopher would come—come soon, so that they would be married and get away from here, so that her father would be stronger. He had had a slight attack the night before; now, at first sight, the instant her eyes fell upon Christopher, she was oppressed by a desire to escape, to run away out of his sight, out of his reach—anywhere.

'I think, if you don't mind, Christopher, as I was going for something, it is best for me still to go.'

'O God! send me strength to give her

up,' was Christopher's cry ; for a look at her face, the sound of her voice, had wakened the love which slept but to arouse refreshed. What should he do ? How battle with the temptation which was now so near him ?

'Yes, my dear, do,' said Mr. Veriker. 'It's some drops I take. You won't be long gone. It's only to Zamperini's,' he explained to Christopher.

Christopher opened the door, watched her down, and then returning, seated himself near Mr. Veriker.

'I am so glad to have you alone !' he said. 'I wanted to give you this,' and he handed him the letter, 'and to speak to you. You know why I have come, but what does she think has brought me ?'

'She knows,' said Mr. Veriker.

'Knows ! You didn't show her my father's letter ?'

'Hardly. Your father was a little plain-spoken, my dear fellow; but I told her his wishes, and that his wishes were yours also.'

For the life of him Christopher could not get out the words which would ask Robin's reply, and the mention of Mr. Blunt's letter had set Mr. Veriker's heart beating, so that his breath came with difficulty.

'What a confounded nuisance this is—directly I begin to speak,' he said irritably. 'I wanted to tell you all about it—how it came round, and what she said—but— I can't do it. It won't let me,' and he put up his hand as if he was in pain.

'Don't try yourself. Never mind; only, what was her answer? Tell me that.' Christopher's effort to speak seemed as great as Mr. Veriker's.

'Oh, all right: as I thought—she likes

you very much; seems quite taken with the idea of marrying you.'

Were his senses going? Did it mean *that*, this buzzing in his ears and swaying of everything before his eyes? Christopher was experiencing all the first distress of fainting. Mr. Veriker was still speaking to him when he seemed to come to himself again. He felt for his handkerchief: a cold sweat stood on his forehead.

'It has taken you by surprise, poor lad,' Mr. Veriker said sympathetically. 'Well, I confess it did me a little; and I'm an old stager, you'll say, and ought to be pretty well up in the caprices of women. But they're unfathomable, you know. I've often told you so;' and to seem more at his ease, for the way Christopher had taken what he said embarrassed him, he essayed to whistle 'La Donna e Mobile,' and failed signally.

Without speaking, Christopher got up suddenly, and took a turn up and down the room. Coming back to Mr. Veriker, he said:

'It's impossible that she can love me. She doesn't, does she?'

'Love! Well, she's a little young, to know much about love. That's a lesson for you to teach her, it seems to me.'

Christopher shook his head.

'I can't help feeling it is taking an unfair advantage,' he said. 'She has taught me what love is, and yet I am going to deprive her of liberty.'

'How liberty?' said Mr. Veriker quickly.

'The liberty of choice. She cannot have that if she is tied to me, and reason will no more listen to her saying "Love Christopher," than it did to me saying "Don't

love Robin." No, no,' and he sighed heavily; 'I must put away the temptation, and you—you must help me. Don't let her ever have reason to say that the two who loved her best wrought her the greatest misery.'

Mr. Veriker looked away, and Christopher went on:

'In that letter you will see what I have promised you to do for her, and in time I shall have more at my command; and if I find that it will make her happy to share it with—another, I will treat her as you would have done. Only let me leave her free. Help me,' he added earnestly. 'You must; for I am much stronger when she is away than when she is near me!'

Mr. Veriker raised his head. Christopher had bent his down on the chair-back, his face was hidden from view. There was a

look of awe in the weary world-worn eyes which Mr. Veriker turned upon him. What was it he felt? Not admiration. We must in a way comprehend to admire, and no experience of his, or of anyone he had ever known, enabled him to gauge the spirit of sacrifice shown by Christopher. Hitherto, fond as he felt of him, he had accepted much of the kindness shown him with a certain easy complacency, feeling that if he had not spent his money in that way he would have in some other—'One of those fellows who build asylums for deceased blind beggar men's dogs and send out books to the blacks who can't read 'em,' he would say descriptively, when drawing a picture of his newly-found relation. The charity, morality, and many other good qualities which Christopher had shown, were but further instances of his weakness; and when Robin, struck

by the fact, had wondered how it was that Christopher had grown up so good, Mr. Veriker had made answer that 'he expected he couldn't help it; that he had been born so,' and his vague surmise found point in the laugh which followed, and which gave thanks that a like calamity had not befallen him.

But the last few weeks of bodily pain and mental suffering had wrought as great a change internally as it had to the visible eye. Through those long, sleepless nights, how many hours had he dragged out in groping, trying to lay hold of something to cling to, and finding all fail him—in none of them support. Books worried him; newspapers, novels—once enjoyed with keen relish—now fell flat, flavourless. He did not want to hear of the world he was forced to turn his back upon, yet he was

tormented by a vague unsatisfied craving. Was it to hear something of that other world, the one he said he had no belief in, which a voice he could not still kept whispering he was fast hastening to?

Christopher believed in that life to come. In spite of being laughed at, he had often spoken to him of his faith in it. Did the belief make him act as he was acting now? A glimmer of consciousness that man had been imaged after an all-glorious Being, higher than his own, capable of a nature more divine than the one he possessed by birth, began to steal over Mr. Veriker. He felt himself tremble, and Christopher at that moment stretching his hand towards him, he could scarce take it in his own.

'I have been exciting you,' Christopher said, quick to catch sight of the increased pallor on his face. 'Don't read the letter

now. Put it away: we'll talk about this another time.'

Mr. Veriker made a movement of his head. Time with him he knew was fast running to its end. He wanted to speak now. He thought he would tell Christopher about Jack—how Robin and he had been left together—ask his advice; speak of why Jack had gone away, and how, since, he had cast him off from them altogether. He did not stop to ask, why the prompting to say this to Christopher? He only knew that he felt it was a sort of duty, a reparation he ought to make, and he would make it if he could get the strength to speak.

'The brandy,' he gasped: 'in that cupboard there. Before she comes in give me some!'

Christopher searched the shelf, but it was in a bottle which he did not at once see.

'Never mind; there's some ether, that will do. Hand it over! Quick! or she'll be back.'

Christopher looked round for some water, got a glass, and finally put the bottle to his nose to make sure it was the right stuff. Mr. Veriker watched him with all the impatience of his disease. He had to tighten his lips to keep back the irritable exclamations which he was bursting to fling at him. The effort at control only aggravated his distress.

'Oh, it's no good now!' he exclaimed, his quick ear catching the sound of Robin's voice. 'I—I——' the sharp pain which came like a stab to him forced him into silence. He shut his eyes, and lay back exhausted.

'What is the matter?' Robin was sniffing the sickly odour now so familiar to her. 'You've been giving him ether? Papa!'

Mr. Veriker tried to reassure her by making a movement of his hand, but the conflicting emotions of the last hour had overtaxed him. He was growing faint.

Tossing aside her hat, Robin flung herself down beside him. Her attitude was a study for despair. Poor child! all unversed in the ways of illness, she had not an idea of what remedies to apply. It was Christopher who brought what was necessary, and in a few minutes Mr. Veriker, who had never quite lost consciousness, was sufficiently restored to open his eyes.

'You have been talking to him too much,' Robin murmured, looking round to Christopher reproachfully.

Mr. Veriker shook his head.

'There are some things we must talk of together,' he said faintly.

'But nothing that I may not hear. I

know what has made you come, Christopher.' He was shaking so that he could hardly stand. She was looking at him steadfastly. 'Papa has told me. You want me to marry you, he says, and I am quite willing. Only let it be very soon, so that we may get away from here quickly.'

'But,' Christopher managed to say, 'that need not stop us. We can go away without it being necessary for you to marry me, Robin.'

'No, no,' she said impetuously. 'I would rather we were married: he wishes it,' she added, lowering her voice. 'It will do him good. Didn't you say, papa,' for she saw he was listening, 'that you would like me to marry Christopher—that it would make you happy?'

'Yes, I said so,' murmured Mr. Veriker. 'I didn't think of him then,' and he

struggled with the emotion which now so easily overcame him; 'but since he has come back——' It was of no use; the lump in his throat was choking him, and, breaking down, he sobbed out, 'He's a good fellow, Robin; a good fellow. God bless him! God bless him!'

Robin stretched out her arms; Christopher caught her hand.

'We'll talk together later,' he whispered. 'Say no more now.'

* * * *

But in the conversation which took place between them later on, nothing better was arrived at. Robin steadily maintained that she wished to marry him, and when Christopher ventured to ask if she loved him, she said she had not any love to give to anyone now—all her love was swallowed up by her father; and Christopher, over-

come by the giant desire, grew accustomed to the whisper it made in his ear that in time, by the aid of his untiring devotion, love would most certainly come; gradually, by degrees, Robin would learn the lesson, and, sweetest of all enticements, he would be her teacher.

Without delay, he wrote at once to his father; and Mr. Blunt, pleased by what he considered his management of the matter, offered no opposition; indeed Christopher, wise in his generation, so worded the announcement in his letter that his father was pleased by the decision, and thought none the less of Robin for the readiness she had displayed in closing at once with such a good offer.

Mr. Veriker, daily weaker, after that one effort, never returned to the subject again. The moment for speaking out—what was

now locked up for ever in his breast—had passed by. Soothed by Christopher's presence and attentions, he began to feel he could not do without him. To send him away was robbing himself of his only chance of life. When Christopher once hinted at the letter he had given him, Mr. Veriker said he would read it later. But the evening he had received it he had put it away, and he kept putting off the trouble of taking it out of his desk again.

So the necessary preliminaries, entrusted to Mr. Holton, an English notary, who resided at Venice, were ordered to be hastened on with all possible despatch, and to Christopher at least the time went by swiftly.

The necessity of constant attendance on her father formed a sufficient excuse for Robin and him to be but little alone, and

seeing how soon her care would be in vain, Christopher forbore to lure her from the watch she kept. It was only Robin who did not, could not, would not, see the rapid decline in Mr. Veriker. A mere hint that he did not seem so well brought down her displeasure on the speaker.

The going away from Venice immediately after the marriage was the event which buoyed her up. Travelling had always agreed with him. He had never been ill while they were going about from one place to another, and as soon as the wedding was over, they were all three, the very same day, to start off, and begin by easy stages their journey to Spezzia, the place which Mr. Veriker had fixed on to go to; where he said he should like to stay, giving as a reason to Christopher that his wife lay buried there.

'Child, I don't fancy it would do me much good to go and see you married,' Mr. Veriker said, the morning before the wedding-day. 'Would you mind if we got Mr. Holton to act my part as father?'

Not a bit; she did not mind. The ceremony she had to go through was a mere ceremony to her.

In the first few days after Christopher's arrival, Robin's couch had been watered nightly with tears of anguish and despair; but now, familiar with his presence, relieved by his thoughtfulness, never obtruded on by his advances, all this was past—sunk in the greater anguish which haunted her like a spectre, the unknown dread of something which, although she shut her eyes to it, she saw each hour stealing nearer.

Posted up as to the day when the marriage would take place, Mr. Blunt, still

in high good-humour, sent a substantial proof of his favour, together with a letter, from which Christopher improvised messages to Robin and her father.

The luggage was packed; all was ready. Madame Giacomuzzi was to look after Mr. Veriker, who had promised to rest quietly until the return of the bride and bridegroom. *Déjeuner* would then be served, and they would be in time for the train which was to take them on to Verona.

To cover the under-current of emotion which oppressed them all, great interest was feigned in Mr. Blunt's letter, scraps from which, while waiting for Mr. Holton, Christopher went on reading.

'It is our Squire,' he said in explanation —'I left him very ill—who, my father says, is dying, and all the place is agog to know how he will leave his property.'

'No heir, then?'

'No children—a nephew who has quarrelled with him. They have sent for him, though, it seems now. He is abroad somewhere.'

'Lucky dog,' sighed Mr. Veriker. 'Why ain't I that nephew?'

'Oh, I don't think you need wish to be: people don't seem to say much that is good about him, I fancy.'

'So far as I ever discovered, nobody ever said anything good of me,' and Mr. Veriker smiled feebly. 'What's the name of this nephew?'

'Name!' said Christopher, whose thoughts were following Robin. 'Oh, Chandos—the Squire's name.'

'Chandos,' repeated Mr. Veriker. 'Wasn't his name Chandos, Robin?' and he turned his head round to find she was not there.

'Robin has gone downstairs,' said Christopher. 'I expect it's time for me to follow her.'

Below, Robin was speaking to Madame Giacomuzzi. The woman held her by the hand. Her motherly heart yearned towards the girl.

'Ah, it is not you she would have chosen,' she said, addressing Christopher a few minutes later, as she stood watching them go, for Mr. Holton had joined them and they were walking towards the gondola. 'She needed but to say "I don't want Paolo," and I knew about whom she was thinking;' and she hugged the baby she was nursing closer, and went to find a candle to set up before the picture of the 'Madonna.'

Meanwhile Giacomuzzi came back from the steps. He had been keeping in readiness the gondola. The old waiter, in company

with the sister who helped in the house-duties, returned from the vantage-spots they had chosen. The marriage had made quite an excitement among the household. Now they must call to mind their duties. Madame would go up and see after the Signor. Would she then give him this letter? and Giacomuzzi took one from his pocket and gave her. It had come an hour ago. In the bustle he had forgotten to deliver it; but she need not say so.

Madame Giacomuzzi—as she said after—took up the letter, gave it to Mr. Veriker, who asked her to give him some water. There was none in the room, and she went to fetch it, and when, perhaps ten minutes later—for something downstairs detained her—she returned, she found Mr. Veriker lying back faint. But she had seen him faint often before, so she threw over his fore-

head some of the water and then thought she would burn under his nose some paper—alas! in her haste, the very letter; but he did not come to, so she called to Giacomuzzi, and he ran for the doctor, and the doctor came, and was still there when the wedding-party returned, and Robin, flushed and trembling, ran up, close followed by Christopher.

'Papa!' and then, seeing a crowd in the room, she made a rush forward. 'Father! father!' but some one intercepted her. 'Father!' she screamed, and with all her might she struggled to get free.

'Hush! hush! he cannot hear you.'

Mr. Veriker lay dead. Beside him was a screwed-up bit of burnt paper.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE of Jack Dorian's chief sources of regret while away, was the fear that he had forfeited the friendship of the Temples. His uncle he knew had misrepresented him to them, and he felt sore that they had believed him.

Not of a disposition to excuse himself—for he was well aware there were many instances in his conduct which called for indulgence—Jack allowed a gradual coldness to increase in their letters, which by degrees came less frequently, until, as before shown, they at length had ceased altogether.

Georgy, staunch in her friendships, at the risk of losing Mr. Chandos's good opinion, never ceased to stand up for her former playfellow.

'I don't care what anyone may say of him, I shall always maintain he was badly treated,' she would repeat to her mother, who, now that the chance of uniting these two seemed over, bewailed Jack's ingratitude as another proof of the ill luck which ever dogged her.

Of a certainty—now that Jack had left him, and the house was shut up—the Squire would marry; and the flavour of the fruit and the vegetables, which came from the Manor during his absence, were spoilt by her constantly showing for how short a time they should enjoy them.

During the whole of those years since Jack had left, the Temples, and through

them all Wadpole, were kept in a continual ferment of expectation. They were the standing dish always hailed with relish, these *on dits* about the Squire. He was going to marry—he was not going to marry; he was married—there was nothing in it. Then as regarded Jack, fifty reports were circulated, to be received or rejected according to the disposition of the hearer: the uncle and nephew had cut off the entail, and because of the sum of money given in consideration to the latter, Mr. Chandos could not afford to live at Wadpole.

Jack Dorian—according to another account—had repelled with indignation this offer, and out of his refusal arose the displeasure of his uncle. Perhaps Mr. Chandos never heard one-half of these fabrications, assuredly the half he did hear did not annoy him; on the contrary, he rather liked

to mystify his neighbours, and was shrewd enough to feel he lost nothing personally by those about him believing he had gained the power of leaving what he possessed at will.

He was staying at Brighton—raising the fondest hopes in the breast of a very fair young lady, who was almost quite what he desired—when this illness attacked him ; at first not considered serious, but gradually increasing, so that when the rector, for whom he had sent, arrived, he was past talking business with him. But, only as was thought for a time, hope was far from extinguished as to his ultimate recovery ; yet knowing how uncertain is life, his physicians recommended if there were any relatives he might desire to see that they should be warned of his danger and sent for immediately.

'I feel like a fish out of water here by myself,' wrote the rector; 'I should like Georgy to come to me.' And Georgy went to him, and all Wadpole saw in her going the certainty that it was she who was to possess the property.

'Now how shall we hunt out Jack?' was Georgy's first inquiry; 'no matter what has passed between them, to find him and bring him here seems to me our duty.'

'Then I had best write to old Clarkson,' said the rector, who would not oppose his daughter's proposition, although he would never have had the strength himself to act thus generously. And Mr. Clarkson written to, he, with a better knowledge of how affairs stood between the uncle and nephew, telegraphed to where he had sent Jack, giving orders that the message should be forwarded on to wherever he might be; and it was by

these means that Jack Dorian was brought to England, only giving himself time before he started on his journey to write to Mr. Veriker.

A happy woman was Mrs. Temple that day when she went to the station to meet her husband, Jack, and Georgy. Mr. Chandos was dead. They were bringing back his remains to bury. Jack Dorian was Jack Dorian no longer; he was Mr. Dorian Chandos, the new Squire of Wadpole. Every one thought him altered, a few thought him improved, and among the few was Georgy. Little wonder that Mrs. Temple's hopes again ran high when she saw the attention Jack paid readily accepted by her daughter. The two seemed instinctively to fall into their old ways, and though, by reason of his uncle's death, and the business it entailed on him, there was no opportunity to

resume their amusements, the time they spent together was generally occupied in recalling reminiscences of them.

'As soon as I am settled down here,' Jack would say; and, as time went on—for it took some months to arrange the necessary business — say rather pointedly, Georgy began to fancy. What did he mean about this settling down? She did not know why, but the sentence always conveyed that the meaning to be understood was 'when I marry.' But marry whom? He had never spoken—never even hinted of any attachment he had formed. Could he, she wondered, be married already? Sometimes, by his manner, she thought it possible. He was absent, preoccupied, talked about alterations in the house, the gardens, the furniture, always as if he had some one in his eye whose taste he was consulting. Georgy was

puzzled rather over this, and, as had been her habit for more than a year now whenever anything perplexed her, she took into her confidence Mr. Cameron.

'You don't think it's you ?' said the curate simply.

'Me ? No ; what makes you ask that question ?'

'Because it entered into my head, as it seems to have entered into the heads of a good many.'

'Oh, really ; has it ? Well, and how do you like the notion ?'

Mr. Cameron hesitated.

'Come, speak out—tell me.'

'I don't know that I ought,' he said. 'I have no reason to give, but I don't like the notion at all.'

Georgy smiled amusedly. 'You are generally so full of reasons,' she said.

'Yes; am I not? But I wouldn't say it for the world to anyone but you; we are always frank together'—she smiled back at him encouragingly. 'From the first evening I met the Squire, I felt towards him a kind of antipathy.'

'Yes; did you?'

'Do I pain you by saying so?'

'No, I don't know that you do; although, being very fond of him, I can't quite see the necessity.'

'Nor can I either, and it is that that troubles me.'

'You must try and get over it while he is away. He is going abroad again.'

'Abroad? I thought it was but to London he had gone.'

'So he has now, but after he comes back next week, he is going to Italy, I believe. He has talked of it to me for some time, only

there was so much to do that he could not leave before.'

'Not to *stay*—he is not going ?'

'No, no ; only about some business—business which seems to me a little mysterious, somehow.'

'Oh—h, I understand,' said Mr. Cameron, and his face beamed at the discovery he thought he had made. 'When is he coming down ?—to-morrow ?—with the bride and bridegroom ?—will he ?'

'No, not until Thursday ; and I'm not sorry, for he's taken an awful dislike to old Blunt, and might be a little stiff with your friend Christopher.' And having reached the Green, where they were to part, the two bade each other good-bye ; Mr. Cameron going his way, humming to himself softly—he felt so unaccountably light-hearted, he couldn't think why—Georgy smiling, 'If

ever I make up my mind to break my mother's heart' (Mrs. Temple had declared that if Georgy married as badly as Isabel had done, this calamity would most certainly occur), 'I shall have to propose to him myself: it will never enter his head unless I put it there; of that I feel sure.'

During the time Jack was being installed as the new Squire of Wadpole, he had written several letters, both to Mr. Veriker and to Robin, to which he had received no reply; within the last few weeks some of these had been returned, and, without seeing any immediate reason for it, Jack began to feel a little uneasy. Could anything have happened to Mr. Veriker? or were they still roaming, hidden away in some out-of-the-way spot which he had forgotten, or did not know? In that last

were coming home. Priors was being made ready to receive them; old Mr. Blunt had settled down there again, and was awaiting their arrival.

It was the middle of April; four months had gone by since the death of Mr. Veriker, time spent by Robin and Christopher in visiting the different places where in former days she had lived with her father. Shocked by the tragic coming to pass of an event which he had so often openly wished might occur, Mr. Blunt readily acceded to any plan which prevented his being brought face to face with Robin's grief.

'I'd rather she got quit of it a little before you come home here,' he said in writing to Christopher; 'so don't mind the expense, go about as much as you like, and let her see plenty to amuse her.'

Christopher had taken him at his word,

and during the time which followed, life had been Paradise to him.

How wonderful is love! with what patience it endures! Christopher never seemed to tire of listening to those rhapsodies which Robin, in her early days of sorrow, kept repeating about her father; nay, rather because they seemed to lift her burden he would encourage her, and in so doing gained her trust and confidence as his reward.

She leaned on him for support, spoke openly to him of her hopes and fears, and by degrees began to lend a more willing ear to the little things he said to ease her sorrow. That her father was at rest, free from suffering and pain. 'Yes, but God could have made him well here.' And then the hope that they would meet again, that they were not separated for ever. 'But I wanted to go with him then.'

Alas, poor Robin! Christopher had need to love her. The poor bruised heart was well worth healing, and the husband was made in no way jealous because of the devotion the child bore to her father. Besides, Robin's sorrow was not morbid, she did not wear it on her sleeve to sadden everyone around her.

After the first few weeks—when, struck down and helpless, time passed she knew not how—brought back to life through the care of Christopher, she strove at control, and would pass whole days seemingly pleased and even cheerful. Only from one eye she could not hide the unbidden tears which some passing sight or careless word would make flow, and then Christopher taking her hand would by a gentle pressure tell her she had his sympathy. Thus they became fast friends, constant companions,

one of them entirely dependent on the other. To be watched, have her wishes forestalled, to be waited on, was something new to Robin; to be trusted in, leaned on, looked up to, equally new and far more delicious to Christopher.

Those former doubts whether he should gain her love did not oppress him now; daily he felt more secure in the happy certainty, and Robin, without knowing it, was steadily drifting to the same conclusion.

Love, in the sense in which she had once known it, no longer existed for her. Her father's death and her consequent sorrow seemed to have killed outright every emotion which did not bear on grief for him. It did not even strike her as strange that she should feel utterly cold and indifferent about Jack, having no interest concerning him, except perhaps how and when he would

hear of the sad event, and a grim satisfaction that he would be startled to be told the circumstances which had made it so tragic.

When Christopher had asked whether she would not like any friend written to, Robin had said resolutely, 'No.' What mattered it now who came or stayed away? it was all the same to her. The icy hand whose hold was laid on him she loved would not loosen its grip.

In spite of all that she had done, he was gone. He was dead. She was left alone. Let the living go their way—no one could ease her grief, no one could make her happy. Her father no longer with her, in those days Robin believed that happiness had fled from her for ever.

Now that Time, with 'healing in his wings,' had begun to soften her sorrow,

bitterness had also given way, and, bridging over more present memories, her thoughts would sometimes wander off to earlier days. What had become of her teacher, master, childish adviser? Would they ever meet again? A sigh would answer "Never," and slowly down her face the unchecked tears would roll. And Christopher, finding her, would take her hand. Why was she crying? Robin could not answer him; hardly could she have made answer to herself, except that she was thinking of bygone days—of things that had happened long ago.

'We shall soon be home now,' Christopher would say, hoping that fresh scenes, new faces, and new duties would prove for Robin the best distraction.

Already many plans had been mapped out of things they would do together, and Robin, by Christopher's description, had

grown quite familiar with Wadpole and its people.

They, in their turn, were far more curious regarding the new arrival than Christopher dreamt of, or Mr. Blunt gave them credit for; and it would have surprised the two not a little could they have heard some of the conversations which about this time—whenever any gathering brought people together—went on in Wadpole concerning them.

'I wonder what she will turn out like—this Mrs. Christopher Blunt,' each one began to say. Most of those who knew Christopher were well disposed towards him; the drawback was 'that terribly vulgar father.'

'But the son cannot help what is amiss with the father. Why should you punish one man for the failings of another?'

This was Mr. Cameron speaking—Mr. Cameron, the curate of Wadpole—and, because he was very fair, small, and boyish-looking, his flock, mostly stout, able-bodied, well-to-do people, were rather given to laugh at him. They ridiculed his zeal, affected to be a little shocked by his principles, and rather resented the plain-spoken way in which he took them to task in his sermons. The vicar, Mr. Temple, though seeming to sympathise with this prejudice, secretly chuckled over the occasion of it, while Miss Georgy, his daughter, was openly the champion of Mr. Cameron, and wherever she was present he had a defender. Overflowing with animal spirits, health, vigour, a feature of her disposition was to take the part of every weaker creature; and Mr. Cameron, town-bred, worked beyond his strength, forced to come to the country—his

chance of life to breathe a purer atmosphere—seemed to have a claim to protection from her.

At first a little amused at his ignorance of sport, his nervousness about guns, and his timidity whenever he found himself on a horse—the awkward fashion in which he sat one sent her into fits of laughing—Georgy was quick to recognise the higher qualities of a man whose courage knew no limit when bidden by duty to obey his call, and whom she saw go willingly and fearlessly to watch by bedsides of which most others shunned the danger. Added to this, Mr. Cameron was eminently conspicuous for the courage of his opinions, and, bashful as he might be in society, never failed to speak did necessity require it of him. Whatever his daughter cared for, Mr. Temple viewed with favour; therefore, though not so

openly, in the rector the curate had another staunch partisan.

Mr. Temple was rector of two parishes—Wadpole, and, some three miles distant, Uplands. Before Mr. Cameron's time, Uplands represented £100 a year, the curate's salary, in return for which every second Sunday a service was supposed to be held in the schoolroom there. But the people of Uplands were not great church-goers. A scattered parish on the outlying edge of a long stretch of common, the place was not viewed with favour: idlers, reputed poachers, bird-snarers, rat-catchers, all congregated there; the cottages were ill-smelling, their inhabitants evil-living. The Pharisees of Wadpole wondered that such a disgrace was permitted to exist so near.

A little down-hearted at sight of Wadpole — everybody seemed so moral and

prosperous there — Mr. Cameron's heart leaped with joy at the account of Uplands; after all, there would be a field to labour in, and he might turn to profitable account the time he was forced to stay here; and going to reconnoitre, he fell in by the way with Christopher Blunt, they walked on together, and found that each enjoyed the other's company.

Mr. Blunt, on being told of their meeting, with a view to step into the magic circle, proposed to strengthen the acquaintance by inviting the curate to a dinner-party, an invitation which the curate was prompt to decline.

'I shall be very glad to call and see you,' he said frankly, 'and if then, at any time, when I could stay, you like to ask me to dinner, I should really feel obliged to you; but I'm not a diner-out, it's a waste of time,

and a lot of dishes don't agree with me.'

Mr. Blunt was disposed to be offended at this—Christopher, on the other hand, was pleased: the refusal was in keeping with the man, and consistent with much he had said. Frightfully sensitive about everything that savoured of ostentation, it was not until a second chance meeting had brought up the subject of Uplands that Christopher ventured to say he hoped he might assist in money, if he could not in any other way. Mr. Cameron readily accepted the offer; and just at the time of the arrival of Mr. Veriker's letter, these two men were slowly creeping on towards a steady friendship with one another.

Mr. Cameron had asked Christopher to come any evening and see him at his lodgings; Christopher had readily accepted the invitation to go. Mr. Blunt—disposed to think

meanly of a man who refused a good dinner when he got the chance of getting one, and utterly opposed to his son being mixed up with anything that brought him in contact with a set of idle vagabonds who got their living God knows how—looked askant on the intimacy, and even went so far as to say as much to the rector.

'The vulgar old upstart!' ejaculated Mr. Temple mentally; but outwardly he only laughed, as was his way when anything which might have called forth a rebuke was said to him.

Taken to task sometimes by his straightforward daughter, he would tell her with a touch of irony that he had found it easier to become a parson than to become a hypocrite; and if not satisfied, as she never was with this reply, she continued the argument, it was only to draw a lot of banter from her

father, ending with his oft-quoted aphorism: It would be all the same a hundred years hence.

But would it be the same? Georgy Temple doubted. She was clear-sighted enough to see there were many duties left unfulfilled by the rector, and the sight of these troubled her. Sighing over them, she invariably felt a yearning pity for her father; and Mr. Temple was indeed much to be pitied, for he was a man with a spoilt life and a warped character. Nature had intended him for anything rather than a clergyman, which fate had destined him for. His godfather held in his gift the living of Wadpole, and when he had recommended that his godson should be brought up to the Church, the parents had regarded the boy as the most fortunate among their children; great sacrifices were made to send him to

Eton and to Oxford, and this done, there was no use in protesting when he was involved in difficulties out of which there was but one way of escape: he must be ordained, accept the living, and marry his patron's daughter.

Had ever anyone heard of such a fortunate young man? The congratulations of all around him made the draught none the sweeter; but George Temple swallowed it, and few ever suspected how much it cost him. It took him years to get rid of the bitterness, discontent, humiliation with which his duties filled him; a fine nature with such a battle to fight would have overcome or would have died.

Mr. Temple did neither—he did not possess a fine nature, therefore he became gradually lowered by the contest, and now, when he was a man on the wrong side of

fifty, with a family grown up around him, he was chiefly distinguished by the eccentricities which arose from doing as he pleased, and letting things manage themselves as best they could without him. He did not commend the righteous, neither did he rebuke the sinner; this latter omission looked on as a great dereliction of duty, and, in his neighbours' eyes, one of the worst traits in his character—that screening of the poacher, the drunkard, the Sabbath-breaker, it was worse than wrong; it was encouraging them in their evil ways. Even Mr. Cameron had ventured to say something of this to him, and the rector bade the young man take them to task.

'You're the right fellow to do it,' he said, but as for himself, he held his tongue.

Partly on account of her having been the

daughter of a former Squire, and because she put forth a claim to sympathy from all who knew her, Mrs. Temple was viewed with great forbearance by her neighbours in Wadpole.

She was a woman in a chronic state of grievance; misfortune, according to her own showing, had never ceased to pursue her.

She had started in life by being of the wrong sex, and so had forfeited the inheritance to which she nevertheless continued to consider herself rightfully entitled.

For years after her marriage she had lived in constant hope of having a son; only daughters were born to her. Her husband, more particularly viewed by the light she applied to him, turned out a perfect failure; he did not to maintain the position in the pointedly a

all contact with the Bishop, and, devoid of ambition, declared that being rector of Wadpole, he intended to live and die there. Mrs. Temple had long ago ceased to recollect that the choice of her husband had been entirely her own, and that against the advice and wishes of her father she had insisted on marrying a very lukewarm lover.

Carrying on the chain of disaster, her eldest daughter, Isabel—now Mrs. Spencer—had married, oh, so badly! a poor man in a marching regiment with nothing but a soldier's pay to keep them on, and babies for ever coming. Of course it was out of the question that they should have anything to give her; it was as much, indeed more than they could do to keep themselves, for, as Mrs. Temple frankly confessed—and here undoubtedly she spoke the

truth—she was no manager, she had not been brought up as one, had never been taught to look at each penny before it was spent, and therefore could not do so now.

So with an income which, under ordinarily good management, might have served for a very sufficient living, the house was always in confusion and disorder: children—the young Spencers—who, coming first under pretext of a visit, prolonged their stay until they were left altogether there, running all over the house; dogs in every room; pets of all descriptions everywhere. The family came and went as they liked, each individual doing what he or she pleased.

There was a schoolroom virtually allotted to the Spencers and the youngest daughter, Dora, between whom and Georgy a gap of some years came.

In her growing-up, Georgy Temple had had for a companion the late Squire's nephew, Jack Dorian; the two, in short, had emulated each other, both pupils of the rector, at whose heels they constantly ran. As a boy, Jack invariably spent his holidays with the Temples; and it gradually unfolded itself to Mrs. Temple that the glory and honour of the family would be greatly restored if these two ever became one. The wish added to the interest she felt in Jack's favour—she cared for the boy on his own account, and in the general ways of life was by no means a schemer; but should the rector die, how little there would be to maintain them! And Georgy married to Jack, what more natural than to shift the burden of the younger children on to the shoulders of their sister—the Manor House was large enough to take them; the

means, compared to what she had now, were ample.

So far then it was decided : there remained but one obstacle—the Squire might marry ; against that he must be guarded. So as long as Mr. Chandos lived Mrs. Temple continued to be, on that subject, his nettle. By reminding him of his age, the dangers at his time of life of changing his condition, she strengthened his resolves, and they seldom separated from a *tête-à-tête* without his declaring to himself that could he but meet the exact person he wanted, if it was only to spite that woman, he would marry to-morrow.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Christopher and Robin arrived at Wadpole Station, they found the carriage awaiting them, but not Mr. Blunt: he was deterred from coming, his man said, by a threatening of gout, from a bad attack of which he had but recently recovered. Unable during his son's absence to endure the tedium of home, Mr. Blunt had spent most of his time in London in the company of those few choice companions who, for the sake of what they got by knowing him, listened to his bragging, and didn't mind his bluster.

Kept temperate and sober during his working life by a will which was strong enough to overcome desire, Mr. Blunt considered that he had earned the right to self-indulgence; and he acted accordingly, the habit of excess growing on him as he grew older.

In presence of his son, and within eye-reach of neighbours whose lives were given up to the god Respectability, Mr. Blunt felt compelled to put a restraint on his actions, eat of the dishes set before him, drink wine only in the measure that was good for him. Suddenly this strain would prove too great; he would one morning invent some business which necessitated a few days' absence, and at the end of a week perhaps he would return and take up again the daily life of dull routine.

But Christopher absent — the house

partly shut up—there was no necessity for coming back, and from a little before Christmas up to this present week in April, Mr. Blunt had been away living a life—according to the people he spent it among—by which every day he drove into his coffin a fresh nail. His continued debauch, for it had degenerated into little else, had at length pulled him up short by a very sharp attack of gout, from which he was only just recovered when he arrived at Wadpole.

With an impatience under pain, which he felt a man so prosperous ought not to be called upon to bear, and a nervous dread of death whenever he was ill, Mr. Blunt had a superstitious aversion to mourning, which Christopher conveying to Robin as delicately as he could, she had so far given in to his scruples as to lay aside all crape, and

consent to appear in black or in white as occasion might call for.

'That is the Manor—Mr. Chandos's place, Robin—there, where that clump of trees is —high up—do you see?'

Christopher was not sorry to have Robin to himself for the drive from the station; he wanted to be the first to point out the features of her new home—*their* home as it was now to be.

'What, on what looks like a hill, do you mean?'

'Yes; behind there, hidden from us, is the house; the ground slopes down from that into what is almost a wood, the right to which he has taken from my father, I hear.'

'Oh, but that isn't very nice, is it? He's a new squire too, isn't he, since you went away?'

Christopher had beguiled many an hour by picturing the place to which he was going to take her, and now that Robin had reached there she felt proud to air her knowledge, and to show him that his pains had not been thrown away.

The spread of her young affections lay all dressed, and like the fields by which they were passing, ready to receive the good seed of each new domestic tie. The house which they were nearing was to be her home, the old man awaiting them another father, the neighbours who would call she would make friends of.

'Oh! see, Christopher, how nice they look!'

The lodge-gates were thrown open; clustered around them were the keeper's rosy children. Robin returned their salutations by touching her lips with the

tips of her fingers; and the woman, looking after her with open-eyed admiration, for there was something very childlike and foreign in the movement she had made, said, 'Pretty young creature! I wonder what th'ole brute up there'll say to her.'

A similar doubt was filling Christopher's mind, causing his heart to flutter with sickening anxiety; he so hoped his father would speak kindly, say what he ought to her; and at the bare supposition of her being wounded creeping in, he was amazed at the rush of indignation which followed.

Looking up, his eyes met hers, and the sight of her fair young face vanquished his fears. Who could look at her and not love her? and Robin now was looking very fair —time had restored her strength, care and good living had brought back a healthy colour to her cheeks, and Christopher's

generosity enabled her to indulge her taste so that her dress was in every way becoming.

Already she had carried by storm the admiration of the servants; most of whom had assembled in the hall and there stood watching her, as she hurried up the stairs after Christopher, to be taken by him into the presence of his father. Mr. Blunt had not thought it necessary to leave the room in which he sat, to come downstairs. A tribute to Robin was paid by the butler, who felt the omission, and tendered his master's gout as an apology.

'So here you are back again at last! Well! oh! this is Robin, is it, the wife you've brought back with you?'

It was not surliness, but a want of breeding which embarrassed Mr. Blunt at this moment, and prevented him speaking

more graciously. He had all the desire then to welcome Robin, and when she, stretching out her hands, offered to kiss him on both cheeks, saying, 'Uncle, thank you for all your kindness; I hope you'll like me,' he kissed her heartily.

'I'm sure I shall,' he said, 'my dear, if you're only half as good as you're good-looking; I shall be very fond of you, you'll see, and make Christopher, there, jealous, I shouldn't wonder; why he's already twice the fellow he used to be—never saw anybody pick up so in my life; and what d'ye think o' me, eh?'

Robin got a little red.

'You are not at all like Christopher,' she said hesitatingly.

The answer did not displease Mr. Blunt. Of a robust stature, with florid face, dark sharp eyes, hair which though grizzled was

thick, and whiskers not altogether grey, he was very well satisfied with his appearance, considered he carried his age well, and thoroughly believed those who told him he didn't look a day older now than he did twenty years ago.

'Well, no; I s'pose not; can't give everything to your children, can ye?'

'Oh! but I like Christopher as he is; I don't want him altered.'

'That's as it should be; take things as you find 'em—a very good motto. Only let him go on putting flesh upon his bones as he's done the last few months, and we'll put up with the rest, and the children can take after their mother, eh?'

What did he mean? Something funny, though what, Robin did not understand—for he chuckled and laughed and winked his eye to Christopher, who either failed like

her to see the joke, or declined altogether to accept it.

'Which of the rooms has been made ready for us, father?' he asked; and the tone of the question displeased the old man.

'Oh, the one at the end of the passage! I've given you the pick,' he said a little huffily. 'It's the best room in the house' —he seemed to address Robin—'barring mine. I don't turn out, you know, for anybody.'

'Of course not.'

Robin was hasty to accept what she presumed was intended as an apology.

'We should be very sorry for you to think of that on our account.'

'Well, you see, I'm master here'—Mr. Blunt felt there was nothing like hitting the nail on the head at the right time—

'I've always been, and I always mean to be.'

'But, certainly. Christopher prepared me to consider you that.'

'All right then,' he said, intercepting his son's reply. 'So long as this is understood I shall be very pleased to look on you as missis.'

'And I shall be very pleased to act as such, as long as you wish me to.'

'That'll be so long as you behave yourself, then,' and the old man laughed good-humouredly. 'Promise to keep it up, and I won't bring no mother-in-law to worry you.'

Christopher was standing by the door waiting. Robin got up and followed him. His heart felt heavy. Certainly his father had never before seemed to him so vulgar. What must she think of him? How did

he strike her? Oppressed by his doubts, he put his arms round her—a rare event, for Christopher was very chary of thrusting forward his affection. He had a very just calculation of how they stood one in regard to the other, and even feared lest he might frighten away the new-fledged love he thought he saw hovering near.

'Robin'— the words of sweet caress which lovers use had been chilled in Christopher's speech, and he could not use them now—'I hope you will be happy here, now you have come.'

'But I must be happy. This is our home. We cannot go away.'

Ah, there lay the sting! Christopher had never asked, never wanted anything beyond having his wants supplied, and the money —always more than he had needed—that his father gave him. His continual weak

health had prevented him from even desiring an occupation, for which, from Mr. Blunt's affluent means, he was well aware there was no occasion. But marriage seemed to have effected a revolution in his position. It was no longer fitting that a man with a wife should be dependent—himself and her—for every penny. He had not felt the gall while away; already it was beginning to chafe him sorely.

'Oh, but it will be all right!'

She saw he looked troubled.

'I shall soon get accustomed to everything; do not fear for me.'

'My father is a little—— Well, old people are sometimes——'

Poor Christopher; he did not know what to say.

'Yes, I know; but don't let that worry you. I shall get used to him. I did not

expect to find him what you are. There can't, you know, be two such Christophers to spoil me,' and she lifted up her face for him to kiss her.

'Am I right?' he said; 'is it true what I sometimes think, that you are getting by degrees to care a little for me?'

'A little!' she had begun to speak in jest.

Suddenly her face turned very grave, and fixing on him her eyes, she said:

'I know it is not yet what you want, but all the love I had left in my heart I have given to you.'

And Robin spoke the truth. At that moment she had forgotten Jack, and was only thinking of her father.

CHAPTER VII.

NEARLY a week had gone by since Robin's arrival at Wadpole, during which time, unacknowledged by himself, Mr. Blunt continued to play company.

Always proud to exhibit his possessions, he felt a twofold satisfaction in displaying them to the daughter of his ancient enemy, who, on her part, entirely disarmed all ill-feeling by her outspoken admiration of everything she saw.

Delighted to have some one to talk to

who seemed always pleased to listen to him, Mr. Blunt did not spare Robin his society. Together, the morning was passed in going round the garden, through the greenhouses, over the stables. She had to listen to the individual cost of everything, and the expense entailed by keeping such an establishment in proper order.

For the afternoon there was an invitation to a solemn drive. That over, the evening was taken up by a lengthened-out dinner, after which Mr. Blunt, rendered more than usually gallant by reason of the wine he had taken, volunteered to teach Robin cribbage.

It was the only game of cards he cared for, he said, and as soon as she had learnt it, they would be able to play every evening.

Until after the bride had been seen at

church—and Sunday had not yet come round—it was not probable that anyone would call upon her, and Mr. Blunt decided that to go out walking beyond the grounds would not be considered etiquette, besides which, it would be running the risk of chance introductions which might be made a pretext for not coming to the house.

Since the marriage many who before had passed him by, with but a stiff recognition, had stopped to inquire about Christopher; they had expressed an interest in his happiness, and sympathy with the young wife whose father had died on her wedding-day.

Mr. Blunt had been ready with his own version of the tragedy, toned down by him to a respectable occurrence which might happen in any well-connected family. He

did not want inquiries made about Mr. Veriker, and he purposely kept back the notice of his death, which Christopher had suggested he should send to the *Times* newspaper.

Even a ramble in the grounds was not viewed by Mr. Blunt with favour.

'I think I'd keep myself pretty much to the house,' he said, 'at least 'til after Sunday;' and when Robin pleaded the want of air, he proposed another round of the gardens together.

Wearied beyond anything she had ever dreamed of in her life; with no one to speak to but Christopher, never a voluble companion, and this terrible old man calling on her for admiration from morning until night —alas, poor Robin!

To whom could she turn? Not to Christopher—a sense of delicacy forbade her

speaking to him about his father; besides, Christopher was so supremely happy. He loved Wadpole; the quiet country life was suited to his tastes, and now that Robin was there he had nothing left to desire. The utter absence of all refinement in Mr. Blunt, his vulgarity in speech and manner, although at times more distressing to his son than to any other creature, Christopher had become accustomed to, and therefore he suffered from no shock such as that felt by Robin. True it was that, filled with anxiety to know what she would think of his father, the first day or so had been very trying; but since then, seeing the old man more attentive than he had ever before known him, and Robin listening, smiling, and good-humoured, the good fellow had rejoiced, thinking how well they were getting on. He had said so to Robin, reminding her that he always told

her she would find out the way to manage his father.

'I dare say it will be different when I come to know the people round,' the poor child thought, trying to administer some comfort to herself; 'that Miss Temple we met riding, I feel as if I should like her.'

'Christopher,' she asked aloud, 'what is the name of the Miss Temple we passed yesterday, when we were out driving?'

'Miss Georgy Temple,' said Christopher absently. His thoughts were fixed on a proposition he had made that his father should allow him a certain sum a year.

'Do you think she is likely to call upon us soon?'

'Very soon, I should say: the rector has always seemed disposed to be friendly, and through Cameron I got rather to know Miss Georgy.'

'Uncle'—she would not call him father; he did not like her saying Mr. Blunt—'says all the people will come next week; do you think so?'

'Most likely; and for that reason I am proposing to run up to London to-morrow with father.'

'Oh, do!' The words were out before Robin knew she had said them; the thought of a day alone seemed to lift a ton weight from off her.

'It is only a matter of business that I should like to see in train to be settled, that makes me wish to go. I was hesitating, from the fear that you might be dull perhaps.'

Christopher spoke—so Robin thought—as if he was a little hurt by her.

'No; I am sure to find something to do, and it is much better you should go now, than be away next week, you know.'

'That is what father said—but I don't know—perhaps it is best, though; when next week came I should be just as unwilling to go as now. I shall never want to leave your side, Robin—if you want to get rid of me you'll have to send me away.'

She made a faint smile do duty for words. Why could she not feel like that? she wanted to; instead of which her heart seemed like a feather at the bare possibility of being left for a day free—a whole day without Christopher or his father.

That evening, later, the plan being arranged and the time of their departure settled on, Mr. Blunt, when giving orders, said: 'About you, Robin—what'll you do to-morrow? I suppose you'll want something to take you out?'

'No, I shan't; don't order any carriage for me.'

She was only too thankful of the reprieve.

'I shall stay at home; I have heaps of things to amuse me here, while you are gone.'

Mr. Blunt looked his satisfaction; he felt sure this act of self-denial was made in obedience to his wishes.

'You'll come to the station with us?' Christopher said.

Robin shook her head.

'No, no,' said Mr. Blunt decisively; 'she's much better at home, as she says, and I shan't forget her, You'll see,' and he looked smilingly at Robin. 'I'll bring you back something from London that'll pay you for us being away.'

So on the morrow—a heaven-born day, all nature awake and rejoicing—in the

morning, to catch the 11 o'clock train, the father and son set off to drive to the station. From the terrace which fronted the house Robin watched them down the avenue, at the end of which Christopher turned and waved good-bye to her, then out through the lodge-gates they went and were lost to sight.

Half-way along the road leading to the town, they overtook Miss Georgy Temple riding, walking her horse so as to keep pace with the new Squire, who, as they had been told, had returned to Wadpole a couple of days before.

Turning to see what it was coming behind them, the two separated so that the carriage might pass between, and as it did so, Miss Georgy bade them a friendly 'Good-morning;' adding, 'Glad to see you back, Mr. Christopher.'

The two Blunts raised their hats; the Squire, who had fallen back a pace, affected not to be looking at them.

'I say, Jack, you'll have to know those people.' They had again joined company. 'You need not make old Blunt a bosom friend, but you can afford to be civil to them in a way.'

'I don't see for what reason.'

'Well, one reason is the son: he's a very good fellow.'

'He's got a beast for a father.'

'Never mind; as a make-weight he's got a beauty for a wife—she is indeed: I caught a look at her passing on Thursday, and she's sweetly pretty. Oh yes, you may grin, my dear fellow, but wait until you see her.'

'That won't be just now then; I'm off on Saturday.'

'Not really.'

'Yes, really; I only came down to say good-bye to you.'

'Shall you be gone long?'

Miss Georgy turned her eyes on the Squire fixedly.

'That depends,' he said, looking straight at her, answering her gaze.

'H'm! I'm not generally a bit curious, Jack, but I should like to know what is taking you abroad.'

'Should you?' He was smiling meaningly. 'Well, I dare say, some day you will see the object I have for going.'

'I believe I know; I'm almost certain that I have guessed right.'

'I shouldn't wonder.'

'Well, shall I tell you what I think?'

'You may.'

'Will you tell me if it's true?'

'I don't promise that.'

'Isn't the Manor going to have a mistress at last?'

'When the master marries, I suppose it will.'

'And isn't the master going away to get married, eh?'

'Let me see, this is the way I am going back. Good-bye, Georgy. Your mother has asked me to dine with you: *à ce soir.* Farewell.'

But she would not let go the hand he had given her.

'Haven't I guessed right?' she said. 'Tell me.'

'Tell you what? I'll tell you this, if you don't take care you'll get hanged for a witch.'

'Didn't I say so?' she said triumphantly, but Jack had jumped over the stile, and Georgy, touching up her horse, rode away saying to herself, 'So that's what is taking

you back, is it? I heard you telling papa it was some business you had left unfinished when you came away.' And Jack, looking back after he had gone on some distance, paused for a moment, divided between regret that he had said so much and the wish to say more.

Somehow, he was so full of Robin that day: whichever way his thoughts strayed they always led to her. The soft air, the bright sun, the cloudless sky, had each its influence. He had walked to where a dip in the road led two ways; there were a few trifling matters to be settled with his agent, and he turned his face towards Wadpole, took a few steps in that direction, and then whirled round.

'I should like to look at the old wood again,' he said; 'I haven't been there since I came back. It was such a haunt of mine

when I was a boy,' and he hummed to himself a favourite tune as he went; and thinking still of Robin, her spirit seemed to bear him company on the way.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN company with Mr. Blunt, Robin had been taken all over the garden, and what he was pleased to call the 'pleasure-grounds,' but beyond that he did not care to go. There was nothing to see down there, he said, referring to the thicket below, which stood a dark spot between the two sloping stretches of green. The place had been let go wild, run over with blackberry-bushes and brambles, that tore the very clothes off your back if you tried to get through them; besides,

that was the place the Squire chose to say belonged to him—'so let him have it,' he added. 'Don't you go near it, Robin.'

And Robin had said 'No;' but now, on this morning, when spring seemed born, and all that had lain dormant and still through the long winter had leaped into life again, Robin's desire led her to seek where Nature reigned supreme. The birds were there, singing in those trees 'mid which their nests were built, and quick as the thought came pictured the delight of stealthily creeping up and peeping in to see the little feathered fledglings as they lay.

There below, under the shelter of those stretched-out boughs — mostly hawthorns and giant shrubs, grown thick and tall because no hand had curbed their lavish

spread—what wealth of flowers sprang up before her eyes : primroses, bluebells, wood-sorrel, violets ! Already, with steps whose fleet impatience—while within range of watching eyes—she vainly strove to curb, Robin was flying across the lawn, and as she went she sang—for the chill of sorrow's hand seemed, for the first time, to thoroughly let go its hold—and her heart, released, rejoiced with all around, and joined in the glad pæan which welcomed back life again. Oh, unison of Youth and Spring ! Winter is past, sorrow is forgotten ; summer is near, happiness is at hand.

Down through the grass, but partly dried of dew—which here and there sparkled like heaps of jewels caught by a beam of light —Robin ran, marking her path by this tree or by that, against which she clung, and panting paused for breath ; then knitting

herself close, quick as a fawn she made a leap across the half-choked brook, and laughed aloud to find herself safe on the other side. And now the thicket must be got into, the barriers forced that guard its outer edge: brambles, whose long trails have caught the wandering shrubs and bowed their aspiring heads to nail them to the ground; furze, dried and withered under the weight of some strong sloe, that, pushing it aside, has broken down the line, to stand thrust out to view. Here is a little gap by which, with many a wriggle, one might get one's body through. Beyond, while stooping to make search for entry of some kind, Robin has had peeps of moss-grown mounds and heaps of autumn leaves, from out of whose brown crispness pale primrose heads are peeping, and, like the child she is, her tongue goes babbling to them.

'You think I cannot get at you,' she says; 'but I am coming. You will see me soon.'

Her head has poked itself well through, her hat she has flung across the furze, and, but that a bramble catches her by the skirt, she would have been inside ere now.

'You naughty, wicked thorns to try and keep me back.' Her nimble fingers—quick to set her free—fling the trails aside with all her force of strength, and scrambling up, she goes on her way to where an ancient holly stands, embraced from the neighbouring bank by suckers of the roses there. 'Now, you *must* go aside!' Robin, impatient, brooked no more delay. With both her hands she freed the opening wide, and then—there was a pause—a cry, and she was caught within the arms of Jack,

whose heart, set beating by sounds, of what he knew not, had drawn him close, and brought them face to face. O Time! hold back thy sands; O Love! spread quick thy wings.

'Jack!'

'Robin!'

Still holding hands, the two had drawn apart, and there stood gazing bewildered, each putting questions without waiting a reply.

The look which Jack cast upon the gown she wore seemed to give Robin the key.

'We've lost him, Jack,' she cried; 'he's gone—he's dead.'

'Dead!'

'Ah, I knew how sorry you would be.'

Jack had turned deathly pale.

'Sometimes I wondered—when you knew—whether you'd try and find me out.'

He could not speak; a horrible tremor had seized him within.

'I didn't write because——' she stopped, the tears, blinding her eyes, fell down like rain. 'What was the use? If you had come, what could you do? No one could bring him back to me — and there was Christopher to manage all the rest.'

'My God!'

To get her handkerchief Robin had let go Jack's hand, and down it fell nerveless at his side.

'My God!' he repeated.

He saw it all; a flash had brought the thing, as it was, before him, with all its chain of evidence complete. The uncle written to—who turned all he touched to money—was this Blunt; the son who had married the young girl, Christopher; the father who had died on the wedding-day

was Veriker; and she who but a minute since seemed locked up in his heart's safe keeping, waiting for him there, he now stood looking at — another's wife. He staggered back as if a blow had struck him.

Robin stretched out her hands, but before they touched him he had pushed them aside, and down over his face the gathering cloud settled, his mouth tightened, his brow lowered.

'Are you married?' he said harshly.

Robin's face flushed, for in the tone a reproach seemed flung.

'Yes,' she said. 'I am married to Christopher Blunt.'

Jack's nostrils quivered. Was it contempt that made him look at her like that?

'What else was there for me to do?' she

added. 'They told me that ease, comforts, having all he needed, might save him. How were these to be got? We were penniless—there was not a soul to turn to—I was friendless and alone.'

If ever guardian angel fought for man, Jack's now did battle nobly.

'Tell her your love,' the tempter cried; 'say why you left—say you were going to seek her.'

'Leave her in peace,' whispered the better voice; 'knowing her love was yours, stain not her innocence by giving it life again.'

'Did your father wish you to get married? how did you see—this man?'

'He came to Venice to see us—to seek us out, was good and kind to *him* beyond anything my words could tell you.'

'And is he kind to you?'

Oh what an effort to get out the words, the clutch that caught his throat at the bare thought of her being happy!

'Yes, very kind; there is nothing he would not do to try and make me happy.'

He nodded his head.

'Are you happy?' he asked after a pause, and the words were jerked out, strained and husky.

Robin's eyes avoided him.

'I think—yes—I was growing to be,' she said faintly.

Was growing—*was* growing! that fiend voice would drive him mad, fevering his blood with fifty wild temptations.

'Did you know that I had written to your father that—I was coming here?'

She shook her head; her eyes were turned away.

'I don't know now why you are here.

Didn't you come to — to — seek after me ?'

'Then your father never showed you the letter that I sent, telling him that my uncle was ill ?' (she was looking, listening now). 'He was Mr. Chandos, the late Squire, who died. My name is Chandos now. I am the Squire here.'

'You—Jack ? You ! What, will you live here — live here near me ? Is it possible ? Oh !'

Words were not given to tell the transport of such joy. Christopher, her past troubles, her present surroundings, all vanished, swallowed up in the delight that she and Jack would be together again ; together to talk of bygone days, to go over things they had done, places they had seen.

Jack, standing there, was the embodi-

ment of all that past which of late had been growing daily more dear to Robin.

The anguish he had caused her, the tears she had shed for him, were forgotten. Already the grass was beginning to show green on the grave of that memory, and it was to the old master—teacher—she gave welcome, with the thought that the same friendship which had existed then would continue now.

Jack laughed, and it was a hard, bitter laugh he gave.

'You seem to forget that you have a husband now. I'm not so sure how he and I should agree.'

'Oh! no one could fall out with Christopher.'

'Indeed? I have managed already to pick a very respectable quarrel with his father.'

'Doesn't it strike you,' he said harshly, 'that it's best I should go?'

She did not answer him.

'Oh women! women!' he cried in thought. 'What fools men are to suffer for them!'

It tortured him to believe that Robin could calmly contemplate the renewal of that mere friendly intercourse which once had existed between them. If he could but make sure that she had not forgotten, had not entirely overcome the love which he knew he had once held entirely his own, he could leave her more contented.

'What good would there be in my remaining here?' he said. 'You would be as far off from me as though the ocean rolled between us.'

Was that true? Robin's heart was quickened by a crowd of new emotions—

regret, reproach, compunction all rose up, battling within her.

'You have a husband now,' Jack added; 'one who you tell me is good, kind, fond of you. No doubt you care for him in return?' Between each sentence he made a pause. Did he hope she would contradict him?

Robin did not say a word.

'But why need I ask the question?' Jack was growing desperate. 'If you had not cared for him—had not thought he could make you happier than anyone else could—you would not have married him. I was not so very far off but a letter would have reached me.'

'A letter about what?' she said. 'How could you have helped us? In those days you were no better off than we were.'

'That's true! I forgot that money always wins the day.'

Robin's face was aflame.

'You dare to say that to me!' she said. 'Jack, you have grown cowardly.'

'No, I have only grown desperate,' he said. 'And what wonder, when I see you sacrificed to a man who made you the price of his seeming generosity. Oh, you may shake your head in denial; but if not, why did he insist on marrying you, knowing that you had no love for him?'

'He did not insist. No, Jack; it was I who insisted when I knew that *he* wished it, and that we both must live dependent on him. I would have it so. I would marry him.'

'Your father deceived me,' Jack exclaimed passionately. 'He wrote me a letter saying you were to leave Venice; that you were going in search of some place where you might live quietly. What did he mean by

that? At that very time this man must have been with you.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'He never told me that he had written to you.'

'Nor that I had written to him? Oh, I see it all now.'

Jack's anger was mastering him.

'I was being cheated, fooled, made a dupe of! This fellow was the very son-in-law he wanted—the one I advised him to look out after.'

Not knowing what had passed between the two, the words cut Robin to the quick.

'He took your advice then, you see, and I have to thank him for it,' she added proudly. 'I have a husband good and kind, generous to me beyond anything I can say;' and gathering up her strength for a final effort, she said, looking at him fixedly:

'I would not change Christopher for any other man living.'

Did that pale, stern face belong to Robin? could those eyes that Jack had seen melting with love, flash forth such fire? A fresh agony writhed his heart; this new variety but added to her beauty. He felt himself growing sick, giddy; his self-control was abandoning him; in another instant he would have to fling himself at her feet, implore her pity, entreat her not to forsake him. He had no more strength left than to wrestle with the horrible dread of giving way to his madness.

Bending his head as if in acknowledgment of what she had said, he managed to force out:

'I think it would be better that I no longer detained you.'

Robin, oblivious of everything but the

effort needed for her own control, made a gesture of assent. They were standing each as it were looking at the other, yet the eyes of both were averted.

'I can but offer you my somewhat tardy congratulations and wishes for a continuance of your present happiness and prosperity. I am not likely to see you again, therefore we shall be spared the awkwardness of future meeting.' He paused. 'Good-bye, Robin.'

'Good-bye, Jack.'

How long had he stood waiting for those words to come—an instant, minute, hour? He could not tell, only he knew that as she spoke she raised her eyes, and up there leaped in him a giant whose name until half-way through the wood Jack did not stay to ask.

The crackling boughs and leaves, and

rustle of the branches as he went madly on his way, proclaimed his flight to her he left behind.

Whether in love or anger, Jack was gone, and Robin stood alone.

CHAPTER IX.

WITH just enough consciousness left to remember that on the road—into which from out of the thicket he would presently emerge — he might possibly meet persons walking, Jack endeavoured to collect himself a little, to get his face into more everyday order, and to pull himself together again. This done, he walked on, his thoughts still so completely in mastery of his other senses that his usually quick ear did not catch sound of a horse's hoofs, suddenly put into motion, galloping quickly away.

Close to the hedge which on one side skirts the mound where three roads meet, only a short time before Georgy Temple might have been seen, standing raised in her stirrup, gazing intently at two figures who, while taking a survey of the thicket, had caught her eyes and arrested her attention.

To the casual passer-by the enclosure below was merely indicated by the clumped-together tops of irregularly grown trees; but Georgy, familiar with every landmark round, knew of a dwarfed, particular thorn, through the cleft stems of which you could get sight of the one really clear spot that the tangle beneath boasted of.

In olden days had she not often scrambled up that hedge in hopes of spotting Jack below? The smile that played around her mouth was brought there by the recollec-

tion of a certain whistle she used to give, attained by great pains and much practice, and gloried in, because, try as he did, stretching his mouth, with both his fingers in, as big as a clown's, Jack could produce no sound.

Georgy laughed outright; what a hoyden she had been, more of a boy than Jack himself! Dear old Jack! she was very glad to have him back again; and then she gave a little shrug, for the conversation they had had came back to her mind, and feeling certain that he meant by going away to bring back a wife, she sighed to think he couldn't live contented without more of womankind—'but there, we're queer beings all of us.'

Evidently now her thoughts were centred on herself.

'I remember I had quite decided that as

soon as I grew up I would marry Jack; and it never entered into my arrangements to suppose that he would say "No."'

While making these reflections she had pulled up before the particular spot. Was the opening still visible? Where the leaves grew thick they hid it out of view. From where she sat she thought that she ought to be able to see, and she raised herself, seemed filled with sudden surprise, bettered her position, and then remained transfixed.

Surely it was Jack?—of that there could be no mistake; but the other? was it—yes, certainly it was, that movement ended the doubt—it was the bride, the new Mrs. Blunt. What were they doing there?—standing, evidently talking to each other so earnestly.

Before Georgy had time to imagine any

answer to her questions, Jack suddenly wheeled round—he was gone; and Georgy, not wishing then to meet him, touched up her horse and turned his head towards an opposite road, half-way down which she branched off by a lane that would bring her out close to the Manor gates.

She had rightly calculated; a little ahead she saw Jack walking, and quickening her pace she seemed to accidentally overtake him.

'Well,' she said, 'have you managed your business satisfactorily?'

For the instant, had a kingdom depended on it, Jack could not remember what, when he parted with her, he had said he was going to do.

'Oh yes,' he answered confusedly; 'that is, I've changed my plans.'

It would never do for him to dine that

evening—as he had been asked to—at the rectory. He couldn't be himself, and talk of indifferent things to a lot of people. Like many men of the world whose feelings are but seldom roused, whenever they were, his *savoir faire* seemed completely to desert him.

'I'm very glad to have met you, Georgy,' he began, 'because if you don't mind, it will save me a walk up to your mother. Would you tell her from me that I shall not be able to dine with you this evening? I find I must start from here at once by the 6.40 train; it won't do for me to stay until to-morrow. Tell her I am awfully sorry, will you? but that I am really forced to go.'

For once Georgy, generally so ready, could find nothing *à propos* to answer.

'Certainly I will,' she said curtly; then

after a moment's pause, 'Are you going round to the Lodge? I'll walk Jacob alongside you.'

'Do,' said Jack, inwardly wishing that she and Jacob were at Jericho.

'What has made you so suddenly change your mind?' she said, as soon as they were going on together. 'Where have you been since I left you?'

'Been! oh, to heaps of places, and there are ever so many more where I ought to go;' and then, meeting her look of inquiry, he continued, 'And as to changing my mind, I don't know that my mind is changed; only I must go—and when you're resolved, what is the use of delaying?'

Georgy laughed.

'Positively,' she said, 'one might believe you were tearing yourself away, that you had some motive for going.'

'Motive! what do you mean by motive? What possible motive could there be, except the one that pleases me? I don't understand you.'

'No!' and she smiled at him meaningly; 'perhaps we don't understand each other.'

What on earth was the girl driving at! Surely no nonsense of any kind about him could have entered her head.

'My dear,' he said gravely, 'a great many people often jump at very wrong conclusions concerning each other.'

She made a movement as if surprised at such an assertion.

'Yes, and yourself,' he went on, 'among the number. Only this morning at the Crossfields, when we were parting, you began throwing out hints about my going away; asking if it wasn't because I thought of marrying. Well, once for all I may tell you

that nothing is further from my mind; but you know I was always very fond of travelling. I should be cramped to death to settle down here. I like a life of freedom, and freedom and marriage don't agree; besides which, have you forgotten that the Squires of Wadpole have mostly died old bachelors?'

Georgy assumed an attitude of utter despair. Bending towards Jack she held out her hand to him.

'Farewell, Jack,' she said, mocking emotion. 'Good-bye; to drown my disappointment I must set off at once in search of the deepest water.'

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Mr. Blunt and Christopher returned late that evening it was to hear from the servants that Mrs. Blunt had not felt well; she had gone out into the grounds during the morning, but since her return she had kept her room.

'Best send for Heywood at once,' said Mr. Blunt fussily.

Christopher begged him to wait until he had been up and seen Robin; and a few minutes later, he reappeared to say that she felt better now she had been lying down.

She complained of headache, but would try and eat some dinner.

'Why, you're looking as white as a ghost,' was Mr. Blunt's salutation, cheerily spoken, as if the sight of her pale face gave him immense satisfaction.

'You haven't been over-fatiguing yourself now while we've been away, have you? 'cos that'll never do.'

Robin hastened to disown the supposition.

'I only walked a very little way,' she said; 'I didn't go out of the gates at all, so it couldn't be that.'

'I'm very glad you didn't; you might have chanced on that Chandos, perhaps, swaggering about.'

Jack's manner of ignoring them, and avoiding, as Mr. Blunt thought, an introduction to Christopher, had rankled within him all day.

'He's no gentleman that, I say, or when he met us he wouldn't have acted as he did.'

'Very likely he felt it a little awkward,' put in Christopher, 'and the carriage passed so quickly by that there was really no need for his speaking.'

'How d'ye mean no need? Miss Georgy could speak, why couldn't he? You haven't done nothing to offend him?'

Mr. Blunt, not in the best of humours, was glad of something to let off steam about. He had been in a state of ferment all day, for under the plea of other business, Christopher had made this the opportunity of asking his father what, now he was married, he thought of doing for him. He considered he ought to have a separate income, and—at best a poor diplomatist—at once discovered his motive by saying he wished it on account of Robin, so that in case any-

thing happened to him she would have an independence settled upon her.

'Independence! what, you mean something independent of me?' asked the wary father.

'Exactly so,' said the simple son. Upon which Mr. Blunt desired that he might be informed of the exact requirements demanded of him, advising that the sum should be talked over with Robin, and reserving to himself until then to give his answer.

All day long the proposition haunted him. Up to this time Christopher had never dropped a hint of needing such an arrangement. In his own case he had been contented with what his father gave him and the interest—about £200 a year—of some house-property which a distant relation of his mother's had left to him.

Could Robin have put him up to make this demand? Seeing it was to be settled on herself, Mr. Blunt thought it not unlikely. Several times leading up to the question, he had beaten the bush to try and get the truth from Christopher, but his son evidently did not understand him, and feeling it would be unwise to ask the direct question, Mr. Blunt had been compelled to swallow his curiosity. To a man so dispositioned this acted irritably on his temper, and he was in a mood to find fault when the sight of Robin's evident indisposition turned his thoughts to another channel; but though for her sake he might spare those present, there was no occasion to hold his tongue about the Squire, and he continued to rake up the dispute about the thicket, what he had not said to him, and what he should like to say to him, until Christopher,

noting Robin's face grow paler and that she sat quite silent, said, in hopes of silencing him :

'Oh, well, never mind now; it won't matter in the least what you think of him or he thinks of you. I saw Cameron in at Topham's, and he told me that Mr. Chandos went off by the 6.40 train; he saw him down at the station; he was going to try and get the night train from London. I don't know what night train nor where he was going, but to some place abroad at a long distance; and how long he may stay or when he will return seemed quite uncertain.'

Mr. Blunt said something to express his satisfaction, but what, Christopher did not heed. The alteration in Robin's face had attracted his attention.

'What is the matter, Robin?'

He got up and went towards her.

'You're not feeling well; what is it—tell me?'

Seized with a mad desire to push him away, Robin had to make an effort at control.

'I don't know,' and she gave a ghastly smile. 'I felt so much better when I came down. I think it's the smell of the dinner must have upset me.'

'That's it,' said Mr. Blunt confidentially; 'it often does so, my dear; it's turned you sick, I dare say.'

'Yes,' said Robin, catching at any excuse for going away.

'I shall have to go back to my own room again; only, Christopher, don't you come.' Her voice sounded quite sharply. 'Jennings is upstairs; she will attend to me.'

A little hurt, Christopher lacked the

assurance to follow her; he fancied she spoke as if she did not wish him to come. He went as far as the foot of the stairs, watched that she ran quickly up, and then returned to the dinner-table.

'I hope there is nothing the matter with her,' he said anxiously.

'And I hope there is,' said his father pointedly. 'So there's the difference between me and you;' and then he emptied his glass as if drinking a health, smacked his lips, and had it filled again. 'We'll go to-morrow and get Heywood to drop in as he's passing here—just make a call: he needn't to say nothing.'

'Oh no, there'll be no occasion for that.'

Christopher spoke hastily; he was frightened as to what Robin might feel.

'It's not likely to be anything but a headache, which I dare say will pass off by the morning; if it should not, I'll ask her what she would like me do to.'

The presence of the servants restrained Mr. Blunt from indulging in the outburst to which he would have liked to treat his son. Leaning back in his chair, he swelled out his portly person and made a continuous chirrup with his lips, as was his wont when imploring a sympathetic Providence to grant him patience.

All his thoughts, his hopes, his wishes, were centred now in the desire that he should speedily see children born to Christopher, heirs who would relieve him of that terrible anxiety he always suffered whenever anything ailed his son.

The prospect of a fine sturdy boy to dandle on his knee softened his heart, and

he spent the evening in building castles, arranging his affairs, and drinking a great deal more hot grog than was good for him.

Robin during this time was going through all those torments we endure when our doubts and fears are turned to certainties. Until those casual words dropped by Christopher about Jack's departure, the poor heart had not known how desperately it had clung to the hope of his remaining.

Even while she had continued to say to herself, 'He will go, we shall not meet again,' the certainty that he would remain contradicted her.

Now he was gone—gone for years—perhaps for ever. Oh, she had so counted on his presence! Together they could bring back those dear departed days, together live

them over again. With Jack she could open her heart freely, speak of her father, ask counsel about Christopher, give vent to the repugnance she felt creeping over her towards Mr. Blunt.

During the weary months that followed on their last separation, Robin had well schooled herself in the certainty that, in the way she had wanted, Jack could not care for her; very tenderly and humbly she had sought to strangle the love he had called into being, and believing it to be dead, she had buried it in a grave which she had long kept green by watering it with her tears.

Sorrow, altered circumstances, fresh surroundings, all had combined to distract her; so that when she found herself brought face to face with Jack, it was the friend she gave welcome to, the old companion of her

early years, without any embarrassment that she had ever made him her lover.

To Jack's manner was due the rankling which she now felt, mingled with her suffering. His tone, his looks, the words he had let drop, had all fallen as seeds of discontent amid what had been hitherto satisfaction: the drop of honey in her cup of gall had been a certain self-complacency, that, although it had proved of no avail, she had sacrificed herself to the utmost.

Suddenly this sweetness had lost its flavour, and she was racking herself with questions of why had she married at all? Why had Christopher been thrown in her way? Why had she not written to Jack? Suppose she had. What now? The sigh that came from Robin seemed to rend her breast.

'Did you speak—say anything?'

Christopher had crept softly in, and had remained sitting out of sight.

'What!'

A fear clutched her — could she have spoken aloud! She opened her eyes and started up.

'Oh, Christopher! I wish you wouldn't come and frighten me so!' she said petulantly, turning herself away from him.

'Dear, I have been here ever so long; only before you lay so quiet, that when I heard you move and sigh, I thought you were awake perhaps, and wanted something.'

'No,' Robin could command her actions better than her words; she stretched out her hand to him—'only to be left quiet,' she added.

'Do you mind me sitting here?'

'I'd rather you went away.'

Christopher turned to go.

Robin was stirred by compunction.

'Christopher, you don't think me unkind, do you? I don't want to be.'

'Unkind! No; why should I think you unkind because you don't want to be fidgeted by me? for fidgety I am, and always shall be, I fear, whenever the slightest thing is the matter with you. The toll we pay for love is anxiety.'

'But there is nothing to be anxious about. I am not ill. I haven't anything the matter with me.'

'Nothing the matter! and you lying here! that is not like my Robin, I am sure.'

The words were so tenderly spoken that they dropped like dew on Robin's fevered heart. Should she tell him—tell him all? Confide in him about Jack, of her meeting

with him, and who he had proved to be?

She hesitated; a something which she would not own, which she resolutely turned away from, rose unbidden and held her back. She knew that she might trust Christopher, that he was worthy of her confidence; it was not that which stopped her, it was something in herself. Still—after all—perhaps . . . .

The opportunity was gone. Christopher, recalling what she had said, pressed her hand with his lips, and before she had fully made up her mind what she would do, he turned away and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XI.

ROBIN'S appearance at breakfast the next morning, recovered and her usual self, disowning any remaining trace of indisposition, and laughing at the bare idea of having a doctor to see her, did not tend to improve the bad temper in which Mr. Blunt had arisen. Possibly the reaction from his self-indulgence of the night before had something to do with his state; when he went to bed his castles were stories high: he had awakened with a sense that they were

crumbling, and now he saw them shattered and laid low.

Added to this, Sunday was a day which always tried him; its minutes seemed to drag themselves out to hours, and he was glad of any prospect which offered some change to the routine of church-going, in which the example set by his neighbours had to be followed.

He had intended that Dr. Heywood should have been asked to pay his call at luncheon-time; this would have insured him hearing all the gossip for twenty miles round. And on his part he had arranged what he would say regarding Mr. Chandos, about whom now he would no longer keep silent; he should tell the doctor that he was free to repeat his words to anybody, and by this means he fancied it not impossible that they might reach the ears of the Squire himself.

As is usually the case when cheerfulness is the result of effort, Robin's spirits seemed unusually high, and this in itself aggravated Mr. Blunt and made him resentful towards her.

The suspicion concerning that money transaction came back with renewed force; he felt perfectly convinced that she had 'put Christopher up to it,' and he cautioned himself to be on his guard, and keep tight hold of the purse-strings, for fear that by independence his authority might be slackened. Christopher dead, Robin left with children, unless he kept some hold over her, who could say how she might treat him? 'No, no!' It was very well now all was fine-weather sailing, but he hadn't forgotten to whom she belonged, nor how 'that who' had served him; and he raked among his recollections in search of bygone

slights and injuries, banking up his ill-humour and setting it smouldering.

Unfortunately familiar with the look upon his father's face, Christopher, noting the impatience of his movements and the surly tone of his voice, felt particularly uneasy.

Up to the present time Robin had seen nothing of his ill-temper, and whatever rough speech he had indulged in had never for a moment rested on her; but this morning she evidently did not please him—his tea was too sweet, he had it thrown away; in the next cup given him, she put too much milk; in each remark she made—and, poor soul, what an effort it cost her to make one!—he found something to contradict, until, with that unlucky fate which generally leads persons at cross-purposes to touch on some sore subject, Robin, reminded by something Christopher said of Sundays

abroad, referred to a particular one which they had all spent in Venice together. Since she had seen Jack her father had been so in her thoughts that his name—seldom mentioned by her before Mr. Blunt—slipped out inadvertently.

Christopher, plunging into a long-winded, roundabout reply, hoped that his father was not going to notice it. Illusory supposition! Mr. Blunt had been itching for something to be dropped that he could catch up and be offensive about.

His state was by no means singular. In Wadpole that very morning a finger might have been placed on a good score of persons, old and young of both sexes, who, to their own torment, and the torment of their families, felt themselves in a similar disposition; but among them all not one laboured under the disadvantages which

beset Mr. Blunt; from whom, the moment his good-humour forsook him, the thin veneering of social polish vanished completely, and you saw the man as nature had left him, coarse, rough, bullying, with no comprehension of any of those finer feelings about which he himself knew nothing.

A great many of the wounds he gave he had no idea of giving; and he prided himself on forgetting the injuries he received far sooner than those who had injured him forgave the rebuffs he gave them.

Only waiting till Christopher had so far delivered himself that he might feel certain of commanding Robin's undivided attention, Mr. Blunt gave vent to a succession of snorts intended by him as a laugh, but which might be taken for anything indicating contempt and derision.

'That's good,' he said, 'about Sundays;

he must have precious altered before church-going was anything in your father's way.'

The sneering tone and manner, more than the words, made Robin's cheeks scarlet; for a moment she was silent; about her father caring to go to church there was nothing she could say. How often, since Christopher had talked to her, had she lamented that she had not been more persistent in her urging. It was true that at times she had asked him to go with her, but when he declined she was quite content that he should stay away; Jack didn't go, why should *he?* In those days Jack had been Robin's standard of morality and consistency.

'He never interfered with me though, papa didn't,' she said, looking up in reply to Mr. Blunt. 'When I was old enough to do as I liked, and I could go, I always went to church every Sunday, more especially

latterly ;' and in an instant her memory had travelled back, and she saw herself setting off to go, because perhaps God would listen to her there, would hear her prayers better, would spare her father to her.

A burst of tears followed on her words.

'Robin ! Robin !'

Christopher was beside her.

'It's because it made me think of him, she sobbed, 'and how I used to hope he would get better.'

Christopher passed his hand tenderly over the bent head, trying to soothe her. He knew how uncontrollably these bursts of sorrow came, and how bravely she tried to subdue them. Already she was wiping their traces away.

Mr. Blunt, for the moment taken aback, now gave vent to a most lugubrious sigh.

'If you're going to give way to the habit

of every time anything's spoken of treating us to a set-out of tears, Robin, it's best for to know that I for one can't stand it; I never could in my life, and I ain't going to begin now. It's what I never was accustomed to—crying in females, more particularly when there's nothing to cry for. It's true you may have lost your father, but that's in a course of nature. Everybody, if they live to sooner or later, must some time or 'nother lose their fathers.'

'Well, of course she knows that,' said Christopher, 'although what difference it makes I can't see. It's only very natural that she should sorrow for him, seeing how devoted they were to each other.'

Mr. Blunt laughed offensively.

'Oh well,' he said, 'I suppose it's the right way: spend every farthing you can lay your hand on; beggar your wife, leave

your daughter dependent on charity, and you'll be lamented as the best father that ever was. It's something new to me, though, and I'd hoped my daughter-in-law would have showed more sense than to try and teach me the lesson. I'm willing enough to let bygones be bygones. I don't want to rake up the past, nor to have names mentioned that I never speak of—only, if they are, don't treat me to a scene which leads to a regular upset;' and jumping up, he pushed back his chair violently, seemed as if he was going out of the room, altered his mind, and came back again.

Perhaps he was expecting that she would say something. Robin tried to stifle her sense of injury. Her eyes, dry of tears now, were opened to the full, bright and sparkling: a spot of colour had come out on either cheek; she held her head more

than usually erect, and her voice, when she spoke, was high-toned.

'I am sorry if I have made you at all uncomfortable, uncle,' she said, addressing him. 'I will take care it does not happen again; but to speak as you have just done of my father to me, is not kind of you.'

'Oh, indeed, isn't it?' said Mr Blunt surlily. 'Well, I'm the best judge of that.'

'No, I don't think you are. I cannot suppose that you knew how much it would wound me, or I don't believe that you would have said it.'

'I tell you what it is, young lady: you know very little about what's happened between your father and me, so the less you take me to task about it the better we two shall get on together.'

His wrath was beginning to increase. Christopher, dreading a further display of it, hastened to be peacemaker.

'Come, come, father,' he said; 'let us say no more about the matter. I am sure you must see that Robin had no thought of vexing you any more than you wished to wound her. So let's forget all about it.'

But, quick to note, Mr. Blunt saw that as he spoke he took Robin by the hand, an evidence, to his mind, that he sided with her.

'Two against one,' he thought; 'and that's what it will be in future if I don't put down my foot upon it.' So, assuming more displeasure than he positively felt, he said:

'Easier said than done, at my time of life. You must, both of you, try and keep

it in mind that I'm master of this house, and therefore expect to be a little studied.'

'Well, I hope you have had no reason to complain of that so far,' said Christopher. 'I'm sure Robin has entirely devoted herself to you.'

'Oh, dear, bless me heart! I don't want her to make a trial of what there's plenty as good as she, and better too, would look upon as a pleasure. There must be a fat lot to complain of in eating and drinking of the best, having a carriage to ride in, and not being asked to soil a finger, especially to one who's been so very much used to that sort o' thing as she has.'

It was Christopher's face that grew scarlet. A glance at him showed Robin how his father's words were paining him. In a moment she had gone over to where

the old man stood, and stretching out her hands to him :

'Uncle,' she said, 'you know that is not what Christopher means. He knows—and I know, too—how very kind you have been to me, and if I have in any way said anything to offend you, forgive it; only—only when—when you speak of my father——'

Her rising tears began to choke her, and unable to stem the torrent, she ran out of the room, leaving the father and son alone.

CHAPTER XII.

BEFORE Robin and Mr. Blunt met again, Christopher and he had come to a very decided understanding, the result of which was a promise that Mr. Veriker's name should be if possible avoided, or, if spoken of before his daughter, should be respected.

Accustomed to tacit submission from his son, Mr. Blunt was not a little surprised to find that in this first measure of swords between them, Christopher was decidedly the victor. It had not struck him so much in

encouraged by something in his face or in the movement, and relieved by the sense that Mr. Blunt was not there, spoke openly of her having had, so far as companions went, a lonely childhood; that she had known but very few girls, and had never formed an intimacy with any of them. This led to Christopher speaking of his bringing-up; in turn Mr. Cameron told them of his early days, and somehow the hearts of the three seemed opened out to each other, and they went on chatting until the clock striking eight made Mr. Cameron jump up in haste to go.

'I didn't know I was stopping so late,' he said. 'I have to go to the rectory yet.'

And then Christopher, having gone with him to the door and across the terrace to the steps, in his frank, outspoken way he said, holding him by the hand:

'I like her—like her very much indeed; she's nice—very nice! I believe that your marriage will prove a blessing to you, and that you both will be very happy.'

Christopher's sensibilities were still sore, and the touch, gentle though it was, made them smart again.

'I only hope that I may be able to secure happiness to her,' he said, a little despondingly; and looking at him, Mr. Cameron perceived that his face was troubled.

'Is it with your father that you fear a little difficulty?' he asked, with that perception many who minister hold, of at once placing the finger on the cause of sorrow.

Christopher's silence told him that he had guessed rightly.

'Oh, but you must not let that come between you: little outside crosses should only, so it seems to me, serve to draw closer

together two who love each other. You must take courage and show confidence in yourself, that she is ready to bear anything for you.'

The latter part of the sentence had been called forth by Christopher's doubtful shake of the head.

'Oh!' he said, 'when I look at her it always strikes me in the same way, so impossible that she should ever care for me as I care for her.'

More than this little outburst with his father, was a certain chill between him and Robin, not the result of it, for he had felt it more particularly the evening before, when she had seemed to turn away from him, and instead of demanding, had only endured the small attentions which, more particularly, seeing she was not well, he longed to lavish on her.

Mr. Cameron seemed to be reflecting on his words.

'Do you mean, because of the difference in outward appearance between you?' he asked simply.

'Well, yes, for one thing—that is a great stumbling-block in the way.'

'I suppose it is—I don't know, though, that it had occurred to me before to think so; still, if it's natural to give more admiration to the oak than to the bramble, why not to a tall, handsome, well-made fellow rather than—such as I.'

'Or I,' put in Christopher, laughing at what he looked on as a change in the pronoun. 'Depend on it,' he added, 'that good looks go a long way with women as well as with us men.'

'And yet I don't know.' Mr. Cameron seemed quite interested in the question.

'I have been thrown — more particularly before I came here—among many who were counted, by everybody who saw them, beauties, and yet they never attracted me.'

'That I can believe—it happens to us all; until the one particular *she* comes, whose face our heart reflects, and then we feel no other can compare with her.'

'Mrs. Blunt is considered by everybody very lovely, isn't she?'

'People always appear to admire her, it seems to me'—and his attention caught by Mr. Cameron's earnest manner of inquiry, he added, 'Why?'

'Oh nothing, nothing, I only wanted to know. Good-bye now, good-bye,' and shaking hands, he went off hurriedly, leaving Christopher standing watching him as he disappeared down the avenue.

'He's an odd fellow,' he soliloquised, 'but I can speak more openly to him than any one I know; no matter what it's about, he manages to give me sympathy. I feel better now, although it's not from what he has said to me. Love isn't much in his line, I fancy; he'd find it hard, I dare say, to win any woman he wanted to marry.'

Mr. Cameron hastening down to the lodge gate, out of it, and along the lane, was saying to himself as he went: What an odd thing it was that to him no face ever seemed able to bear comparison with Georgy Temple's; even by the side of this beautiful Mrs. Blunt—and while Robin was talking he had been particularly attracted by her beauty — he should give the preference to Georgy.

After church that morning, there had

been a very general discussion of Robin's appearance, with a universal verdict in its favour. Everyone who spoke of her pronounced that to look at she was charming. Georgy was the only one who in any way dissented. Nothing about Robin seemed to please her, and, astonished at such an unaccountable prejudice, Mr. Cameron determined at once, by seeking an introduction, to find out if there was any reason why she should imply that she did not mean to be intimate with her.

More than favourably impressed by the visit he had made, he was now hurrying to the rectory, delighted at the good report he should have to give to Georgy, and bent upon using all his influence to dispose her to take a warm interest in their new neighbour.

'Is—— Have they finished?'

Not able to decide the nature of the Sunday meal, which he hoped was over, he found it easier to turn the question.

The domestic who opened the door, without committing herself, indicated that they were all in there. At this Liberty Hall, Sunday was a day of liberty: servants went out or stayed at home, as they felt inclined, and the family got what they could when they could, and went without what had not been provided for them.

Opening the door of the dining-room, for the curate was too frequent a visitor for it to be thought needful to announce him, Mr. Cameron found everybody still seated at the table, towards which he advanced with the certain assurance of being welcomed, when, overcome by amaze-

ment, he stopped. His eyes did not deceive him—there sat the Squire!

'Why—you! I thought you had gone abroad—to stay ever so long?'

'Yes; did you?' said Jack, with a happy ignoring that it was any one's business to wonder what had brought him back. 'If I move a little nearer to you, Georgy, Mr. Cameron will find room by Dora.'

But Mr. Cameron did not seem disposed to accept the place proposed for him.

'No, don't disturb yourselves,' he said, without moving or taking his eyes off Jack. 'Well, you do surprise me to find you here,' and though he did not make the demand in words, his face asked for some explanation.

With a little look at Jack, whose attention was concentrated on his supper, Georgy came to the rescue.

'He came back,' she said, 'because, I think, he could not bear to leave me; or else he has decided to break my heart entirely by changing his route and going instead to India.'

'To India!'

'Yes; he has a mamma in India. Perhaps you did not know that?'

She spoke in a tone of banter which seemed to mystify Mr. Cameron. He suddenly felt out of place, ill at ease, the more so because for the moment he could not remember what had brought him to the rectory—why he had come there.

'Oh, I know,' he said in his impulsive way. 'I came to speak about the Blunts. I have been making a call there—seeing my friend Christopher's new wife. She is very nice, Miss Georgy. I'm sure you'll like her when you know her.'

'When I know her, perhaps I shall,' said Georgy, with a little scornful screw of her mouth; 'but I thought I had made it plain to you that I had no intention of knowing her.'

A glance at Jack showed her his attention was arrested. He looked at them both, quickly, from one to the other.

'But you told me that you intended to call,' he said.

'Certainly, I shall have to call with mother, but that binds me to nothing. I need never go again.'

'That seems a little strange—rather unneighbourly?'

Glad of an ally, Mr. Cameron had drawn up his chair and sat down. He was looking at Jack assentingly.

'My dear Jack,' and Georgy's straightforward gaze sought his, 'I am just as free

to choose my friends as you are yours, and, if you remember, you distinctly announced your determination of cutting the Blunts altogether.'

'My dear Georgy, permit me to remark that I often say a great deal more than I mean, and therefore I warn you against taking me *au pied de la lettre*.'

'It was a pity you tried to influence me, then.'

'I never presumed to suppose you would be guided by my opinions.'

'Really! And we two—as Miss Boothby remarked to mamma, to-day—cut out so exactly by Nature, as it were, for each other?'

Mrs. Temple coughed noisily, as if a crumb had gone the wrong way. She thought Georgy was showing her hand too openly, and wanted to attract her attention.

'That'll do, mother; I see you frowning at me. Mother fears I am wearing my heart too much on my sleeve,' she said, turning to Mr. Cameron.

'Does she?' he said absently.

He could not make Georgy out to-night, and he could not make himself out either. Coming along he had felt so happy and jolly; now he felt miserable and discontented.

'I suppose, after all, it will be the right thing to do, sir, to call on these Blunts?'

Jack was addressing the rector, who, apart from the others, was deep in a paper, puffing out volumes of smoke, and drinking deeply of cold tea.

Notwithstanding his seeming abstraction, he had heard, as he always did, every word that was going on around him; only, until

actually appealed to, he never troubled himself to enter the list of arguers.

'Call on them; of course you'll call. You're not the chap you used to be if you're going to visit the sins of a vulgar old brute of a father on the head of his inoffensive son.'

Jack smiled his thanks for his old friend's good opinion.

'I'm afraid I've made it a little awkward by being rather stiff-necked over this dispute about the thicket land,' he said. 'You must try, if you can, to help me out in the matter, sir. Tell them I hadn't a fairy godmother to bestow "on me the gift of good temper."'

This was an allusion to a story the children had been reading to him.

'Leave that to me,' said the rector confidently. 'You don't know old Blunt yet.

He'll be ready to lick the dust off your boots if he can only once get you inside his door. But that's not the case with his son. Christopher's a gentleman, whatever his father may be.'

'He has managed to get a very pretty girl for a wife,' put in Mrs. Temple with a certain degree of asperity; 'and if she is at all a lady, he ought to consider himself a very fortunate young man, for of course no one about here would have had him.'

'Well, they hadn't the chance,' said Georgy, 'seeing he never asked them.'

'You don't know that he never asked them.'

'I know he never asked me.'

'Perhaps you wish he had?' said Jack teasingly.

'No, I don't. But perhaps you do.'

'I?'

Knowing what Georgy did, Jack a little overdid his astonishment.

'What possible motive can you have for saying that?'

But without making any answer, Georgy moved from her seat and went over to the other end of the room. Could she be jealous of Robin's good looks? Jack wondered. This sudden prejudice seemed a mystery—one which that night, however, Georgy was not disposed that he should unravel, for she fetched a chair and sat down, so that she could lend her aid to the singing of the hymns which had been commenced by the children and her sister.

Jack, in the meantime, returned to the subject of this visit he wished to pay; and Georgy, who kept one ear at their disposal, heard him and her father enter into the

arrangements for going to the Blunts' the next afternoon.

'It will lessen the awkwardness,' said Jack, 'if there are others there beside me. I can seem to have called at that time by accident. They need not know that we arranged to go together.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE next morning Mr. Temple so arranged his plans that a seemingly chance meeting brought him face to face with Mr. Blunt.

'The very man I was thinking of,' said the rector, with a shake of the hand more than usually cordial. 'I was wondering as I came along whether I shouldn't meet you.'

Mr. Blunt's face beamed with satisfaction. It was just what he desired, to be greeted in this neighbourly way; and to add to his

satisfaction, on hearing that he was going into Wadpole Mr. Temple altered his route, in order to go as far as the Green with him.

'Have you heard that the Squire is back again?' he began, after they had gone on some way chatting on indifferent subjects.

No; Mr. Blunt had heard nothing of the kind, and the words in which he said so were spoken rather huffily.

'Yes; he seems to have altered his plans —it's the fashion with these young people. We didn't do it, did we, in our day? He has come back and intends stopping, so he says.'

Mr. Blunt made no remark; he was turning over in his own mind how he should give the rector his opinion of Mr. Dorian Chandos's behaviour.

'What's he swelling himself out like a

bloated frog for?' thought the rector—Mr. Blunt when attacked by rising choler had the habit of expanding all the loose flesh about his person. 'Something's brewing in the fellow; I'd best have my say before he begins.'

'He was with us last night,' he went on aloud; 'most days he spends half his time with my girls and me—he was so much among us in bygone days that it only seems natural to see him there. He's a good fellow; little hot-headed, but it's soon over. By the way, you and he had a little dispute about that thicket land down there, hadn't you?'

Ah, now they were coming to it. Mr. Blunt had his statement all ready, but before he could speak the rector ran on with:

'Yes, I thought so; he was saying as

much to me. Ah well, you mustn't let that interfere with your living good neighbours. I needn't tell you what he said about it; but I told him that he didn't know you, and I did, and if he liked to pay his respects to your daughter-in-law this afternoon, my people were going, and he could go with them, and I'd be guarantee for you giving him a good reception.'

Mr. Blunt's face became perfectly iridescent in the rush of pride which swamped his anger. Coherent words failed him, and he could but stutter out something about acting the part of a gentleman, on which ground people would always find him ready to meet them.

The rector nodded his complete assurance, and his task ended, he speedily found an opportunity of remembering an engagement which would take him in an opposite direction.

He disliked Mr. Blunt heartily, and oddly enough—for he was ever lenient to failings—judged him hardly. That seeming readiness to put his self-respect into his pocket, his eagerness to elbow his way into the society of those who looked down upon him, drew forth the contempt of the rector, who, had Mr. Blunt assumed no other position than the one his own energy had helped him to, would have respected him, have given him the hand of good-fellowship, and have been delighted to bear him company.

The struggles endured, the resolution maintained by those who have climbed, step by step, Fortune's ladder, have a wonderful fascination for most men, more especially for indolent natures such as Mr. Temple's. The rector knew well that talents had been committed to his own

care, but so long a time had gone by since he used them, that he had even forgotten where they lay buried.

That morning Mr. Blunt did not waste much time in Wadpole; he was all anxiety to get back and make his announcement to Christopher and Robin. Mr. Dorian Chandos, according to his showing to Christopher—Robin was not present—had come to his senses, and though the rector had gone a roundabout way to manage it, had as good as asked if a visit from him would be agreeable.

'The Temples are coming this afternoon' —the Boothbys the day before had intimated as much. 'Oh, you'll see, we shall have them all here before long,' and he rubbed his hands delightedly—at length he should see Christopher among the county society.

And going into the drawing-room he walked about, looking here and there, oppressed with the idea that some one ought to be bustling about setting things in order.

Repose of mind or manner is very difficult to attain to by persons of Mr. Blunt's order.

Wishing to prepare Robin for the probable state of excitement in which she would find his father, Christopher went in search of her.

She was in the little morning-room, sitting close by the window, looking out; her work lay beside her. At sound of Christopher's entering she caught it up, and while he told his news she sewed industriously, her needle flying, seeming to keep time to her heart, which was set beating violently.

'I expect, if the truth was known, it's

Miss Georgy Temple that's bringing him back,' said Christopher, who had gone on talking, without waiting for an answer. 'Everybody says they are cut out for each other, and that they'll marry some day.'

Hand and heart seemed paralysed; the needle was in the work, but Robin could find no strength to draw it out.

'You ought to get on well with this Mr. Chandos,' continued Christopher; 'he has lived a great deal abroad, they tell me: you and he perhaps will be able to talk in French and Italian together. You'll like that, won't you?'

Bending more over her work Robin gave a nod of the head in reply.

'Come, put down that old work, do,' said Christopher persuasively, 'and have a turn in the garden with me. We shan't dare to propose a longer walk now we know these

people are coming to see you;' and going nearer to her he stooped down, trying to catch sight of her face, telling her as he did so that he had thought her looking pale that day.

'Christopher'—tossing aside her work, Robin had sprung to her feet—'I want to say something—I've something to tell you. I know this Mr. Chandos who is coming here—he used to be called Dorian; he knew papa and me too.'

No one could call her face pale now. Up to the temples the crimson colour had rushed, brought there by the sudden impulse which had stamped her resolution.

In the midst of that whirlpool of disappointment, pain, pleasure—all so mixed together that she did not know the cause for either—there had suddenly leaped up the feeling that she must tell Christopher—

tell him all—and when he knew, ask him to take her away.

'Knew you! knew your father!' Christopher's calm, astonished air fell as a chill on Robin's hot resolves.

'Yes,' she said; 'in old days we were constantly together.'

The trembling within was so great that unless she spoke slowly he would hear her teeth chatter.

'Why, you silly little girl,' he said, hoping that by not seeming to see her emotion she would better overcome it, 'how was it you didn't tell me that before?'

'I didn't know it—he had changed his name.' She could speak with greater ease now, ask herself what had made her feel so oddly before.

'Perhaps, after all, though, you may find he is not the same man?'

Christopher spoke hopefully.

'Yes, he is; I met him on Saturday.'

'On Saturday—here?'

'In the wood, by accident; and he told me that now his uncle was dead, and he was the Squire here.'

Christopher looked pained.

'You wonder why I did not tell you,' she went on. 'I meant to—I wanted him to know you; but perhaps because of his quarrel with uncle, he——' and she stopped.

'Oh, I can well understand,' Christopher said, only too pleased that his father should be the cause of hesitation; 'in the morning, when we passed him, I saw he wanted to avoid us.'

'He knew no more of my being here then, than I did about him.' What ease it had given her, this speaking to Christopher! 'He was going to Venice to look after us;

he did not know what had happened to *him*, nor that I was married to you.'

'No; didn't he? It is then so long since you saw him?'

'Oh, it seems ages ago to me——'and she paused for a moment, looked dreamily, 'but really it was but a short time before you came to us that he left Venice.'

Completely disarmed of suspicion, Christopher said:

'And you met this friend, and you were not going to tell me? I think I ought to scold you, you know.'

'I wanted to tell you all the time,' she said earnestly.

Christopher gave her a little shake of the hand.

'Now I see,' he said, 'what it was that upset you while we were away.'

'Yes. It has brought so much of the

past back to me. I knew him when I was a child; he told me so many things that since then you have told me, Christopher,' and raising her eyes swimming with tears, she added, 'Except you, I never knew anyone but him talk to me about doing things that are right and good.'

'He sowed the seed then,' he said, looking at her tenderly.

'No; you did that. He tilled the ground, perhaps,' and she smiled back at him.

She could smile now—that fit of madness which for a time had swept over her, had passed away. Christopher's presence and attentions were no longer oppressive: if he touched her, she did not shrink away, but sat with her hand in his, telling him about Jack, what he had been to her, what he had been to her father; and as they talked, the great burden of her discontent

seemed to melt, and not knowing enough of her woman's weak nature to discern that it was the sun of that presence which was drawing near, she cheated herself into the belief that her happiness was restored solely for the reason that she had confided in Christopher.

'I shall never keep a secret again from you,' she said—'never.'

'That is all I can ask of you;' and he sighed to think how far his wishes outstripped his words.

'It is only as it should be with husbands and wives—they ought to trust each other; shouldn't they?'

'They ought to. I should like to think you could always trust me.'

'I mean to. Oh, Christopher, you are very good!' she said, looking at him seriously. 'I used to think he—Jack—Mr.

Chandos, you know, could do nothing wrong, until I knew you.'

It was the truth she spoke. Unknowingly Christopher had many a time served as a standard by which Robin saw flaws and imperfections in one she had before held faultless.

'I am afraid his temper is not an easy one to get on with. Papa always used to say it wasn't; he would take everything so seriously, you know.'

Christopher had none the worse opinion of him for that. He could easily imagine how trying to a man of even not the strictest principles Mr. Veriker might be; and the somewhat vague reports of Mr. Chandos's antecedents coming back, he thought it not improbable that the present Squire of Wadpole would rather have it forgotten that he had been once Jack Dorian.

'I wonder what he intends doing,' he said. 'Do you think he means to recognise you? It will be very awkward if he doesn't, won't it?'

'I couldn't bear it—it would be impossible. If he does that and stays, Christopher, we shall have to go away.'

Christopher was silent for a moment; the sense of his position weighed upon him. Robin's seeming indisposition had driven that question of a separate income out of his mind; now it must be returned to and settled upon without further delay.

'I can't think,' he said, looking at her, 'how it is I never heard you mention him—this Mr. Chandos. And your father, too, he used to speak so frequently of people he had known, to me.'

'Oh, he has spoken of him.'

'Not by name, or I should have recollected it again.'

'I used to think that by his not writing, papa thought that Jack neglected him—he was very sensitive, poor dear, about anything of that kind. He got to be quite morbid about people forgetting him, and not wanting to seem to know him; and I noticed how he left off ever speaking of Jack. Perhaps it was in my mind to—I used to think he might have written to us.'

Christopher was going to ask more, when the ringing of the luncheon-bell interrupted the conversation.

Robin half rose, and then sat down again as if hesitating.

'Would you rather not go down?' said Christopher, anticipating her wishes.

'Much rather not. It's uncle; he is sure

to begin speaking of it, and I shan't quite know what to say.'

'All right; I'll find some excuse why you are not there, and I'll send your luncheon to you.'

'And then after, if I go into the garden you'll meet me there, and we'll stroll about together quietly, you and I.'

CHAPTER XIV.

'MRS. AND MISS TEMPLE, ma'am, have called to see you,' was the summons which had brought Robin to the drawing-room.

She and Christopher had had their stroll in the garden, and a long talk together, which had served almost entirely to restore Robin's former equanimity; she still felt terribly nervous at the thought of meeting Jack, but that strange turmoil of emotions, so suddenly stirred within her, had calmed gradually down and subsided.

'Had he come with them?'

Her heart was in a flutter; she could not put the question, but the words kept repeating themselves until she was in the room, receiving Mrs. Temple's languid congratulations, Georgy's unusually stiff greeting, but all the while with eyes and ears for nobody but Jack.

'Mr. Dorian Chandos, Robin,' she heard Christopher saying; and instinct must have made her turn in his direction, for her hand was taken and Jack was speaking—saying something to her—something about his surprise at this meeting, his astonishment at seeing her.

'Is it as I fear, that you don't remember me?' he said anxiously, and the poor little hand which lay so cold in his was almost crushed as he waited for the answer.

'I think she is quite overcome by

astonishment.' It was Christopher who had come to the rescue, and who, by talking very quickly to Mrs. Temple and Georgy on the score of unexpected recognitions, endeavoured to withdraw their attention.

'Oh yes, I recollect you perfectly,' Robin at length found breath to say. 'I was only wondering whether, now that I am married, you would remember me.'

Each spoke with hidden meaning.

'Remember you!' exclaimed Jack; 'is it at all likely I could forget?'

It had just come to him that he was still holding her hand; turning to Mr. Blunt, who sat completely mystified, he said, 'Why, I have known her since she was so high, and ran about in pinafores — her father was one of my greatest friends.' And then, smiling as if the thought amused

him, he added, 'How shall I bring myself to call her anything but Robin, I wonder? and I shan't know she is speaking to me, so accustomed was I to hear her call me Jack.'

'It's one of the most extraordinary things I ever heard of in my life,' said Mr. Blunt, remembering that he had heard some very fishy reports about the Squire; and if he was mixed up with Veriker he hadn't a doubt but they were true.

'It certainly is an odd coincidence,' said Mrs. Temple, considering herself appealed to; 'isn't it, Georgy?'

But Georgy, seemingly not one whit interested in the matter, was attentively examining a picture.

'Isn't it odd, Georgy?' repeated her mother. 'Don't you think so?'

'No; if you ask me I really don't see

anything very odd in it. The odd thing to me is,' and she looked pointedly at Jack, 'that being in the same place, Mrs. Blunt and Mr. Dorian Chandos should not have met before.'

'Can she have seen them, or has he told her?' thought Christopher.

His face seemed to betray the suspicion, for Georgy in her turn wondered, 'Does he know?' and then, following the eyes of husband and wife, she fancied they exchanged a look of meaning, and the supposition gave a more favourable turn to the opinion she had formed of Robin.

'And if I had kept to my original intention of going away, we might not have met now,' was Jack's answer.

He was not going to be put out of countenance by Miss Georgy; still, he had no wish just then to enter upon an en-

counter with her; and to avoid it he turned to Mr. Blunt, and little guessing how sharp were the thorns he stuck, began a conversation in praise of Mr. Veriker.

Robin had to entertain Mrs. Temple, Georgy occupied herself with Christopher; the three couples talked separately and a little apart from each other.

Several times Georgy made a movement to go, but her mother, delighted at the chance of pouring her misfortunes into the ear of a new listener, paid no attention to the signs given. Jack seemed equally blind; his whole attention was centred on making himself agreeable to Mr. Blunt. And so successful was he, that at parting the old man begged him not to think any more of that little affair about the thicket land; he was only very sorry that they hadn't known each other then as they did now.

'And you'll come again,' he said heartily. 'Pay us another visit soon.'

Jack declared that he should be delighted.

'I was hoping,' and he tried to catch Robin's ear, 'that Mrs. Blunt would ask me.'

'Oh, you were waiting for that, were you?'

Mr. Blunt laughed amusedly, calling out to Robin:

'Come over here, my dear: tell Mr. Chandos how pleased we shall be to see him whenever he feels inclined to drop in.'

Robin seemed to be struck with sudden shyness.

'Oh, but uncle, it is for you to say that. I am not mistress here.'

'Yes, yes, you are,' said the old man

encouragingly; 'so long as I'm left master you shall be left missis. Can't say fairer than that, can I, Squire?'

'Certainly not. Then I may come?'—Jack was still addressing Robin—'may I?'

'Yes, if you like to, you may;' and she lifted her eyes, and for the first time looked at him, and Jack felt the look had made them friends again. Perhaps Robin felt it too, for she gave a little rippling laugh. 'I shall be very glad to see you,' she said, 'and so will Christopher too.'

'Ah, yes; we mustn't forget Christopher!' exclaimed Mr. Blunt loudly.

'That goes without saying,' put in Georgy Temple, who had come up behind them. 'I feel assured that my cousin finds it impossible that he should ever forget Mr. Christopher Blunt.'

'What the——'

There was just time for Jack's face to ask the question. Already Mrs. Temple was engrossing the father and son's attention; Georgy had turned towards the door; Robin was saying 'Good-bye' to her. A minute or so after, they had left the house.

If anyone, to whom Jack felt bound to give an answer, had asked him why he had returned to Wadpole, he could not positively have satisfied him. He had come back because he could not stay away—that was how it seemed to him; come back, beckoned by an irresistible desire which he had silently combated with until of a sudden his strength had failed him, the temptation had overcome, and he was journeying home, seeking reasons to give to others without striving to find any to give to himself.

His first step was to go to the rectory to see the Temples, and this had led to the arrangements in prospect of the visit which they had just paid.

The clang of the gates as they went out seemed to bring him back to his more sober senses. Up to the present time he had been occupied in what he meant to do; one thought had had possession of his mind: he must see Robin. Well! he had seen her; they had met; they had parted. What did he mean to do now?

Aunt Temple was dribbling out discontent about the luxury of such *persons'* surroundings; Georgy was walking along silently—evidently her humour was not a happy one. To the admiration bestowed by her mother on Robin she said nothing, but each remark Jack made was met by a snub or a sneer.

'Well, thank goodness, it's over,' she said, answering an appeal made to her. 'We've done our duty, and we've paid our call, and there's an end to it so far as we're concerned for a very long time to come.'

'They'll be calling on us. That's the next thing,' said Mrs. Temple aggrievedly.

'And if they do, there'll be no need to see them. We can say we're not at home.'

'Neighbourly!' said Jack sarcastically.

'But Jack, only remember what our drawing-room always is to look at,' and its recollection made Mrs. Temple sigh dismally. 'I don't mind with people who know us—of our own set—but these purse-proud newcomers—oh! it's terribly humiliating, it really is!'

'Rubbish! stuff! nonsense!'

Jack grew quite energetic.

it ?' said Georgy, following the direction of Jack's eyes, which were fixed on the wooded slopes below.

'Yes,' he said, without looking round at her.

'The place where we have spent many a happy hour years ago, when we were boy and girl together. I think you've forgotten all about those times, Jack, now.'

'On the contrary,' he said; 'I don't think I ever valued them so much, nor you either, Georgy'—he had taken hold of her hand, and was looking with that wonderfully expressive face of his, which in every appeal he made seemed to carry it at once irresistibly—'so you mustn't forsake me.'

'It will be your own fault if I do,' she said seriously.

'My own fault, will it? How so?'

'Because you won't trust me.'

Jack's eyes regarded her inquiringly. He was wondering how much she knew, or was it only a guess she was making? Anyway, he felt inclined to confide in her. Jack was suffering from that sickening despair which comes over most of us at sight of the plans, hopes, wishes, planted out by ourselves, uprooted by another's hand. Life seemed suddenly robbed of all its brightness. He had just had his first sight of what some see early—he had looked at 'happiness through another's eyes.' All his future seemed stranded. There was nothing for him to do—nothing for him to care for. Unknown to himself, he was filled with a craving for sympathy, and the chord was vibrating under the touch of Georgy.

'Well,' she said, meeting his eyes fearlessly, 'are you afraid to do so?'

'No; only first promise to do me a favour.'

She nodded her head in assent.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Be kind to that girl we have just left—for my sake—will you? You don't know what a terrible disappointment I have had about her.'

He had let go her hand, and was looking straight in front of him away from her.

'She was the girl you were intending to marry, wasn't she?'

Georgy was trying to help him out with his story.

'Did you guess that? Well, only on Saturday, when I parted with you to go into Wadpole, I was as certain of making her my wife as I am now that she belongs to another man. Going into the wood there—because I was thinking so much about her

and about old times—we met, and I had to learn that she was married already.'

The face Jack turned to Georgy said more than any words of his could convey.

'Poor fellow!' she murmured involuntarily, and for a minute they walked on silently.

'Then had she deceived you, Jack?' she began.

'Deceived me!' and he laughed bitterly. 'No; she has no more thought that I care for her in that way than—that I care for you. Oh, Georgy! you women are most unaccountable beings; a man may expend all the devotion he can upon you, but unless you hear him say in plain words, "I love you; do you love me?" it all counts for nothing.'

'Yes; but you forget what awful mistakes we might make if we went about judging by

mere actions. Do you mean that you never spoke to her, then ?'

'Never a word. I had known her from such a mere child that, positively, until we had to part I hadn't realised what she was to me; and then, you know, I hadn't anything to offer her. It was on that account that I wrote to Clarkson, as I told you.'

'I thought you said a friend had advised you.'

'Yes; and that friend was her father. It was the first time he ever spoke to me of his threatened danger; that led him to speak of his past life, and to give what turned out very good advice to me; and in my turn I begged him to write to these people, who, he said, could give a shelter to his daughter. He did so, the young man came out, and the result of the visit you see.'

'But didn't you ever write to them? didn't she ever write to you?'

'I heard from the father once or twice, and then he wrote to say they were going away from Venice. Oh! I feel sure it was meant to deceive me, for there wasn't a word of this young man, and hardly a mention of Robin.'

'And she never wrote herself; hadn't she been used to writing to you?'

'Yes; formerly she had, but then—well—I—oh! I didn't feel inclined myself to write in the usual way, and after what had passed I thought I saw why she didn't either.'

Georgy waited, wondering what she had best say; with the gauge she possessed of a woman's nature, this silence on the part of Robin was a test of love.

'Don't you think,' she said, 'that she

must have suspected that you cared for her?'

'No—now I don't believe that the thought could have ever entered her head. When we met down there, it was delight at seeing an old friend that she showed me; she was in raptures to think we were going to live near each other; and I—I wanted never to see her again, to go to the farther end of the world, to put all the space I could between us—it was that feeling which sent me away.'

'And what has brought you back?'

Jack felt himself suddenly pulled up short. 'Oh—oh!' he stammered, 'of course I soon got over that; a few hours in the train brought me to my senses, and showed me that I couldn't throw everything to the winds in that wild fashion. I have duties here, and other people to think of—oh, it would never have done to go away!

No, I must get over it as best I can; live it down; accustom myself to meet her. It would be very different if there was any feeling on her side, you know; then in honour I should be bound not to return.'

'I think you would have been much wiser to stay away,' said Georgy firmly, 'at least for a time; I thought she seemed very ill at ease in your presence.'

'That was because we had seen each other before, and nobody else knew of it.'

'Wait, wait,' said Georgy; 'now I am going to make my confession.'

And to Jack's astonishment, she told him how, standing there—pointing back to the tree—she had overlooked them, and that the suspicions it had raised were her reasons for treating Robin so coldly.

'But that is past now,' said Jack, 'and you'll try and like her, won't you? You

can't help it, when you know her. Be a sister to her Georgy, do.'

'Are you intending to be her brother, then? No; don't look so frightened; I don't mean anything, I assure you. I promise to remember that the Squires of Wadpole have always been bachelors.'

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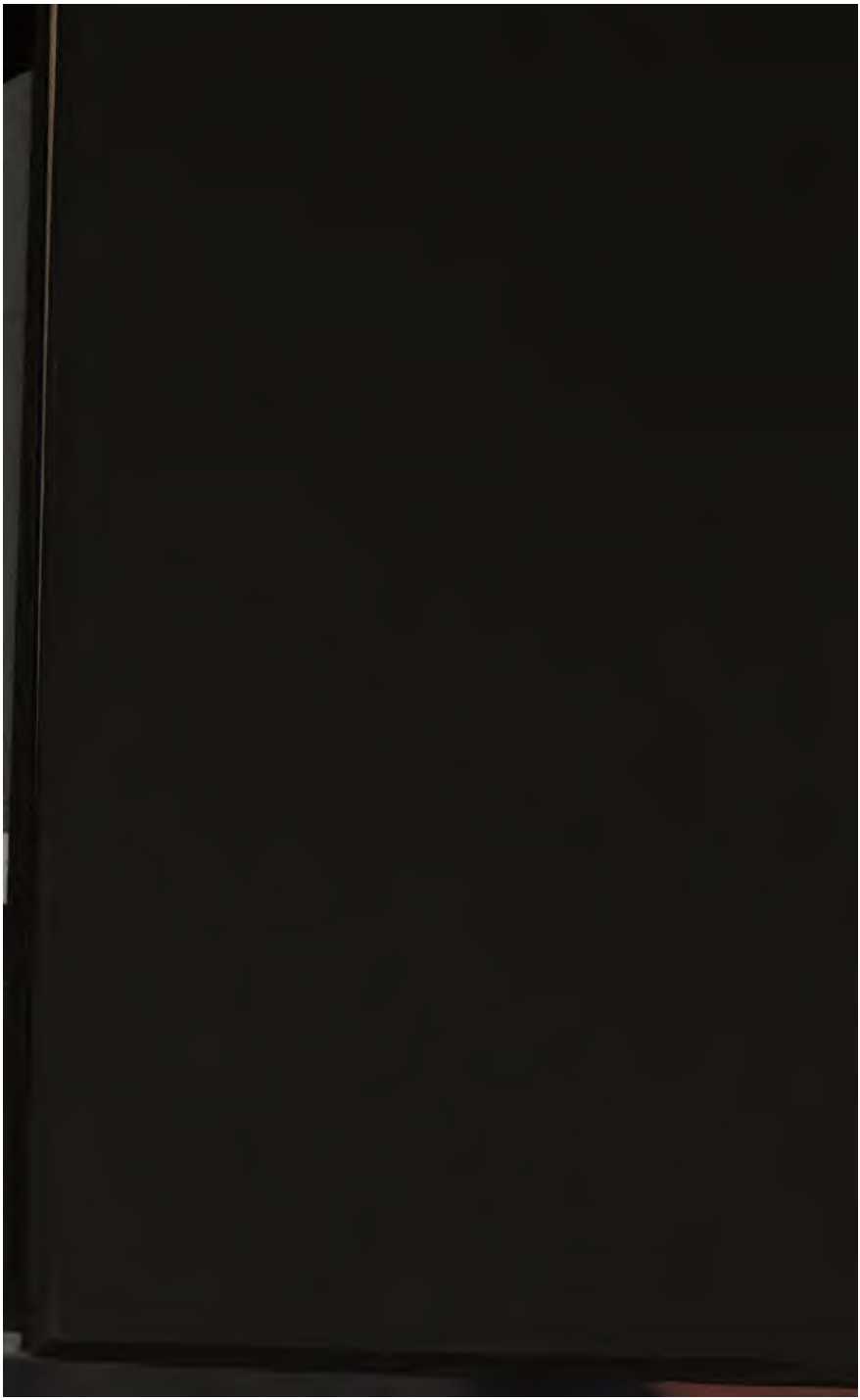
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